Oliver Wendell Holmes, Wit, Humorist
and Poet

by

Rosella Simmons Upperstrom

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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES,WIT,HUMORIST,AND POET

by

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PREFACE

In presenting Oliver Wendell Holmes as Wit, Humorist, and Poet, special stress is being laid upon his poetic ability in the realms of wit and humor.

A significant part in the preparation for the writing of this article was an investigation that was at first instituted in order to discover what constitutes wit and humor, and particularly the types that are labeled as the American brand. A criterion for evaluating what is humorous and witty in verse, together with the methods for judging when such poetry becomes nationalistic in scope, was formulated.

Since the supremacy of Mr. Holmes in these fields has frequently been challenged, it was decided that it would be feasible to compare him with three leading contemporaneous poets, close rivals of his in this domain of literature, and thus establish, once and for all, the evidence that he surpasses them.

Criticism, derogatory in nature, regarding his style of versification, particularly in relation to his use of the heroic couplet, and accusations of not only servilely imitating the artificiality of eighteenth-century verse, but also of unsuccessfully attempting the romantic style of writing poetry, have been made at various times. Because of the investigator's great appreciation of Mr. Holmes' verse, she felt it was

incumbent upon her to remove, as far as possible, any such criticisms of Mr. Holmes' poetry; so, she proceeded to gather criteria from the doctrines of many of our greatest literary critics, and by applying their tenets to Mr. Holmes' verse to produce sufficient evidence to conclude that he is a real poet. The characteristics of Mr. Holmes' poetry in relation to classicism, neo-classicism, and romanticism were also studied, and the results are herein set forth.

It is with a sense of genuine satisfaction that the author was able to confirm her theory that Mr. Holmes was greatly underestimated- that he has not only upheld the tenets of classical tradition, but also in his inclinations as a romanticist, he shows the best attributes of romanticism.

After an analysis of his various types of poetry was completed, the versatility and skill of Mr. Holmes' verse were clearly evident in the realms of familiar verse, vers d'occasion, and satire. As a consequence of this investigation, the author is satisfied that the wit and humor of Mr. Holmes' poetry are not only of the highest type, but also that he is thoroughly representative of our nationalism. He has achieved what few have accomplished within the range of comic verse- the rank of a truly great poet. Since it has been discovered that he is our best writer of familiar verse, the Dean of our writers of occasional verse, and our greatest poet of satirical poetry, we must accord to Dr. Holmes the

position of the first and still the greatest American poet of wit and humor.

It has further been discovered that because of his originality, the quality of his wit and humor, and unique imagery, he surpasses those British poets that he has been accused of imitating.

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He cannot be complete in aught
Who is not humorously prone;
A man without a merry thought
Can hardly have a funny bone.

- Anonymous.

A pun is a noble thing *per se*. It is a sole digest of reflection; it is entire; it fills the mind; it is as perfect as a sonnet- better. It limps ashamed in the retinue of humor; it knows it should have an establishment of its own.

- Charles Lamb.

True wit is Nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well
expressed.

- Alexander Pope.

A Poet veined with dew and fire,
A Wit, and a Philosopher.

- J.T. Trowbridge

CHAPTER I

HOLMES AND THREE CONTEMPORARY HUMOROUS POETS

In order that we may evaluate the wit and humor in the poetry of Holmes, it would seem advisable, at first, to compare him briefly with three contemporary nineteenth-century poets outstanding in the field of humor; namely, Eugene Field, James Whitcomb Riley, and James Russell Lowell.

Of the three, Eugene Field and Holmes seem to be most closely akin. These two poets put on " cap and bells" and scattered their " germs of wit " merrily about; both could " lead old Horace some modern paces", and as one writer states;

> Each of them could forsake wit and drollery for that deep,ripe humor that lies as close to tears as to laughter- the humor that is a large part of almost every piece of English literature that has outlived the hand that wrote it. 1

Field's humor, for the most part, lies in the field of mimicry, burlesque, and parody. He has given us imitations and paraphrases of Chaucer's style of form and expression as well as those of Sir John Suckling, Edmund Spenser, and Horace, which are exceptionally good and irresistibly funny. We can find very little of this type of humor in Holmes; but the

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1. Joel Chandler Harris, Introduction to The House by Eugene Field,pp.vii-ix .

Doctor has shown he has the ability to write a parody- "Parson Turell's Legacy" in imitation of his own poem, "The One-Hoss Shay", and ending with the lines:

> For there never was pitcher that wouldn't spill,
> And there's always a flaw in a donkey's will. [1]

In the realm of mimicry where Field is so outstanding a humorist, Holmes has proved his versatility in this domain also by his poem,"Prelude to Parson Turell's Legacy" :

> I'm the fellah that tole one day
> The tale of the won'erful one-hoss-shay.
> Wan' to hear another? Say. [2]

Much of the humor of Field was expressed in a daily column of comment on the passing show of American life, where there must needs be slapstick jokes, "the humor of which perishes with the explosion".[3] The passing phases of mushroom society and shallow literary pretenders were unmercifully lampooned by Field. The difference between him and the national humorists of the Artemus Ward type was that through Field there"ran a vein of pure gold of human sympathy",[4] and the same can be said of Mr. Holmes. Field uses "the rapier of his wit" chiefly as a weapon of assault on local politicians; but after he has duly provoked the wrath of such men, he uses the words of gentle humor, characteristic of him, as a soothing balm to their rage.

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1.Oliver Wendell Holmes. Complete Poetical Works, p.162.
2. Loc. cit.
3.Slason Thompson,Life of Eugene Field, p.398.
4. Loc. cit.

Holmes's poem, "How Not to Settle It", closely resembles Field's method of lampooning politicians:

> I say once more, as I have said before,
> If voting for our Tildens and our Hayses
> Means only fight, then, Liberty, good night !
> Pack up your ballet-box and go to blazes! 1

In the field of satire both poets hold high rank. "The Lambert Tree" is Field's most celebrated satire, which some critics consider is entitled to rank with the classical satires in English because of its literary merit and exquisite humor. Greenbackers and their candidate, Judge Lambert Tree, are humorously berated in this poem, a portion of which is here given:

> But the lambert tree has a grander scope
> In its home on the distant wold,
> For the sap of the lambert tree is soap
> And its beautiful fruit is gold. 2

Now let us compare one stanza of the most celebrated satire of Holmes's poetry, "The Sweet Little Man", with the stanza from "The Lambert Tree.":

> Bring him the buttonless garment of woman!
> Cover his face lest it freckle and tan;
> Muster the Apron-String Guards on the Common,
> That is the corps for the sweet little man ! 3

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1. Oliver Wendell Holmes. Op. cit., p.139.

2. Eugene Field, "The Lambert Tree", cited by Slasom Thompson, Op. cit., p. 225.

3. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Op. cit., p. 197.

Both poems are four-line stanzas having similar rhyme, the third line rhyming with the first and the fourth with the second; both have used iambic pentameter for two of the lines of the stanza. Field uses it for the first and third lines, using only eight syllables for the second and fourth lines, while Holmes has used pentameter verse for the second and fourth lines and has put one extra syllable in the first and third lines. (Our poets were experimenting with verse patterns at this time.) In form and smoothness and the charm of the swinging lines they are similar, but in spirit and ideas how different they are ! Field's satire a child could enjoy as a poem, because true to his fondness for fairy lore, he has his mythical tree and magical sap and beautiful fruit of gold. To an adult the spirit back of the poem is mildly sarcastic and the drollery is exquisite, providing he understands local conditions and persons that are being satirized. On the other hand, a child would have difficulty in understanding the "buttonless garment of woman" for a "sweet little man", but mature people throughout the nation could readily appreciate the scathing denunciation that Holmes is meting out to the slackers who are shirking military duties. The mood is bitter and ironic while the figures of speech are clear, homely, and forceful. This comparison of the two poems is made to bring out, especially, the national appeal that Holmes makes in

the field of satire, and which will be discussed in a later chapter when Holmes's types of poetry are analyzed; furthermore, it shows the superiority of Holmes over Field in the realm of satire in which the two excelled.[1]

Like Holmes, Field was continually longing for the day when he could put aside the "cap and bells" and write something worthy of a genius. He feared that if he continued in the part of Mercutio, he would never be taken seriously as a poet; but happily for us, Holmes and Field were willing to serve in the role "of him who rules in humor's vast domain, and pours on one and all the warmth and sunshine of his grateful mirth", as Eugene Field puts it. One critic has said that "the summer lightning of Field's wit, which illumined what it touched was too swift, too fine, to be caught and put into cold type". Only a few flashes, which played here and there on kindred souls have been caught and held fast. Holmes's electric flashes of wit were caught and held fast in his neat little packages of heroic couplets.

Since space will not allow for further analogy between the two poets, and because satire is the most important phase of their wit and humor, we will use this mutually characteristic ability of theirs as a basis of comparison with the satire of James Russell Lowell, who rivalled them in this domain of literature. Field is the rival of Lowell in

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1. Infra., pp.110-124

his marvellous powers of mimicry, and some of his dialect poems are among the best in our literature. Lowell felt regarding the use of dialect that "the tongue of the people in the mouth of the scholar"[1] was the right motto for poets, and the Yankee tongue that was in his blood became his happiest expression for his verse. Lowell knew that the people in Cambridge were forgetting it, but it was still in a thriving condition on the Yankee farms. When he selected this tongue for his "Bigelow Papers", his choice was a very happy one, for through it and the ideas it expressed, he created his greatest work- the folk-lore, if one may call it, that shows Parson Wilbur, the scholar, and Hosea Bigelow, the illiterate, are brothers under the skin when they meet on the common ground of feeling and discuss human rights. The "Bigelow Papers" best represent his wit and humor added to the forces of reform; there is a happy combination of good sense, Yankee wit, and scathing sarcasm used as an instrument against slavery and the lack of patriotism, and Yankee dialect was never used more effectually. "What Mr. Robinson Thinks" proved to be such an effectual weapon in its use of satire directed against the slippery and mercenary policy of many northern statesmen that in their vengeance Lowell was shut out from all places of honor to which they had the key. Lowell did not

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1. James R. Lowell, "Introduction to the Biglow Papers", Complete Poetical Works, pp.441-458.

temper this weapon of steel so that it produced any soothing, silvery sounds, but rather this instrument slashed and seared the wounds that were made, the point being kept hot by the furnace of his wrath. His satire lacked the gentle words of humor that Field or Holmes would have applied as a soothing balm to the wounds made by their satirical outbursts.

For the purposes of comparison, let us take one stanza from Lowell's satire, "What Mr. Robinson Thinks" :

> General C. he goes in fer the war,
> He don't vally princerple more'n an old cud;
> Wut did God make us raytional creeturs fer,
> But glory an'gunpowder,plunder and blood ?
> So John P.
> Robinson he [1]
> Sez he shall vote fer General C.

Now let us take a stanza from Holmes's "How Not to Settle It" bearing on the same topics, politics and war :

> To cut men's throats to help them count their votes
> Is asinine-nay,worse- ascidian folly;
> Blindness like that would scare the mole and bat,
> And make the liveliest monkey melancholy. [2]

"No weapon is so potent as ridicule," says Parson Wilbur, "but it is a kind of weapon that must have a button of good-nature on the point of it." And that is what Lowell's weapon of satire lacks- a button of good-nature.

That Holmes's wit and humor differ very widely from his fellow-townsman's, Lowell's, is very evident according to

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1. Ibid., p.66.
2. ~~O.W.~~ Holmes, op. cit., p.138.

John G. Whittier :

"for Lowell's keen wit and scathing sarcasm, in the famous "Bigelow Papers" and the notes of Parson Wilbur, strike at the great evils of society and deal with the rank offenses of church and state. ..... His verse smacks of the old Puritan flavor. Holmes has a gentler mission. ..... Long may he live to make broader the face of our care-ridden generation, and to realize for himself the truth of the wise man's doctrine that 'a merry heart is a continual feast'. 1

But we must recognize the "Bigelow Papers" as the first and best metrical presentation of Yankee character in its thought, dialect, manners, and singular mixture of coarseness and shrewdness with the fundamental sense of beauty and right. 2

In this work, wit and humor are so remarkably united that we have a distinctly high grade of satire, and we agree with Mr. Stedman that the "Bigelow Papers" are a distinct and "positive addition to the serio-comic literature of the world".

We feel that in this great work, Lowell has represented one phase of nationalism, but it will be our duty to prove that Holmes represents other phases of nationalism besides that of satirizing the conditions of his day. 3

In the rollicking measures of their rhymes, their forceful imagery, and homely language, Lowell and Holmes

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1. J.G.Whittier, Prose Works, Vol. III, p.382.

2. Edmund C. Stedman, Poets of America, pp.321-325.

3. Cf. post., pp.55-91.

are very similar, and both have an abundance of that enviable quality, Wit, which, according to Lowell's own words :

"demands a clear and nimble intellect, presence of mind, and a happy faculty of expression. This perfection of phrase, this neatness, is an essential of wit, because its effect must be instantaneous, whereas humor is often diffuse and roundabout, and its impressions cumulative." 1

The following passages are good examples of their wit ; Holmes speaks of Lowell as he-

> Who, born as a poet, grasps his trenchant rhymes
> And strikes unshrinking at the nation's crimes; 2

Lowell speaks of Holmes as he-

> Who is matchless among you for wit;
> A Leyden-jar always full charged, from which flit
> The electrical tingles of hit after hit. 3

The two poets are very similar, too, as humorists in the realm of pure fun, and the following examples will show the similarity in the effect produced, but a characteristic difference in style; for in the milder realm of pure fun, Lowell again uses his Yankee dialect, while Holmes's fun depends upon incongruity (here the disparity of age between the old man and the young girl) and the surprising turn of thought in the ending.

> Zekle crep' up quite unknown
> An' peeked in thru' the winder,
> An' there sot Huldy all alone,
> 'ith no one nigh to hinder.
> James R. Lowell, "The Courtin'" 4

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1. James Russell Lowell, "Humor, Wit and Satire", Function of the Poet and Other Essays, p.45.
2. Oliver Wendell Holmes, op.cit., p.294.
3. J.R.Lowell, Complete Poetical Works, p.381.
4. Ibid., p.170.

My bosom heaves,remembering yet
   The morning of that blissful day,
When Rose, the flower of spring, I met,
   And gave my raptured soul away.
. . . . . .
Sweet was her smile,-but not for me;
   Alas! when woman looks too kind,
Just turn your foolish head and see,-
   Some youth is walking close behind!

"The Last Blossom"-Oliver W. Holmes,[1]

If humorous poets were not still denied their due, the poetry of James Whitcomb Riley would hold a higher place in American literature than it does today, for the dialect poems of Riley constitute his best poetry. One critic claims that Riley is a greater artist in the field of dialect than Lowell because Benjamin F.Johnson,the quaint,innocent Hoosier farmer, is more convincing than Hosea Bigelow whose sentiments are often too elevated for the speaker.[2] Furthermore, Riley is not only a master of the Hoosier dialect, but faithfully mimics the dialect of the Irish, in "Michael Flynn and the Baby"; the negro dialect,in "When De Folks Is Gone"; the Scotch dialect, cleverly portrayed in " John Tarkington Jameson " (a parody on "John Anderson,My Jo,John"), and the Dutch dialect, in "Leedla Dutch Baby".

You will not find in Riley's humorous poems the glittering epigrams of Holmes nor the stinging social satire of Lowell,but the "homely common chuckle of humanity", the

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1. O.W.Holmes,Op. cit., p.156.

2. W.L.Phelps,"Introduction" to Selected Poems,by J.W.Riley.

humor of childhood, "the piquant agreeable jest" as illustrated in"The Old Tramp" where he hollers back:

> You're a purty man! You air-
> With a pair of eyes like two fried eggs,
> An' a nose like a Bartlett pear ! 1

Two of the most important factors in humor are the element of surprise and the incongruity of imagery. Riley shares these two important characteristics with Holmes and the added flavor of elfishness at times. Like Holmes,too, his humor is of a kindly nature. Once to a poet-critic he wrote :

> Yes, the bee sings-I confess it-
> Sweet as honey-Heaven bless it! -
> Yet he'd be a sweeter singer
> If he didn't have no stinger. 2

Both Holmes and Riley were fond of the cheery and hopeful things and had the ability to discover the quaintly humorous near at hand, and each could write humorous poetry that bordered on the side of pathos-the humor of the highest type- in many cases representing an outlook upon life, a retrospect. They are distinguished by a keen sense of fact in everything they write, and their meaning is never abstruse; but their shrewd sayings are bright with native metaphor. Their simple natural thoughts are expressed in transparent language, the diction of which is felicitous.

For purposes of comparison let us take Riley's poem,

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1. J.W.Riley, Complete Poetical Works, p.453.

2. Ibid., p.523.

"A Man of Many Parts", which will very well illustrate the element of surprise which he shares with Holmes:

With logic at his fingers' ends;
Theology in mind,
He often entertained his friends
Until they died resigned;
And with inquiring mind intent
Upon Alchemic arts
A dynamic experiment-
A man of many parts! 1

A difficult problem presents itself when we try to make a choice of one of Holmes's poems (which is not to be too highly selective) for the purpose of analogy, but the following passage will be sufficient,no doubt,to prove the point that is to be developed. It is taken from"Rip Van Winkle,M.D."

Some weeks went by-it was not long to wait-
And"please to call" grew frequent on the slate.
He had,in fact, an ancient,mildewed air,
A long gray beard, a plenteous lack of hair,-
The musty look that always recommends
Your good old Doctor to his ailing friends.
Talk of your science! after all is said
There's nothing like a bare and shining head;
Age lends the graces that are sure to please;
Folks want their Doctors mouldy,like their cheese.2

In analyzing the two poems we can see readily the characteristic traits of the two humorists, both fun-loving, and the incongruities of "being <u>entertained until they died resigned</u>" and of having a "<u>plenteous lack of hair</u>", and the ending of each tune on a surprise note. But,although we recognize the ability of each in this realm of humor, Holmes

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1. Ibid., p.59.

2. O.W.Holmes, <u>Op. cit.</u>, p.66

surpasses Riley in polish and wit. Riley's poetry we may think of as representing the diamond, uncut and unpolished, but Holmes's poems are perfectly cut gems whose facets sparkle with unsurpassable brilliance.

To prove that the humor of Holmes is the greater in retrospect, let us take for our consideration the occasions where he and Riley are both looking back to their old school days. The two following passages will serve the point to be made here :

Friday Afternoon

We seem to hear the clicking
Of the pencil and the pen,
And the solemn, ceaseless ticking
Of the timepiece ticking then;
And we note the watchful master,
As he waves the warning rod,
With our own hearts beating faster
Than the boy's who threw the wad.
-James Whitcomb Riley 1

The School Boy

How all comes back! the upward slanting floor,-
The masters' thrones that flank the central door,-
The long outstretching alleys that divide
The rows of desks that stand on either side,-
The staring boys, a face to every desk,
Bright,dull,pale,blooming, common, picturesque,
Grave is the Master's look; his forehead wears
Thick rows of wrinkles, prints of worrying cares;
Uneasy lie the heads of all that rule,
His most of all whose kingdom is a school.
Supreme he sits; before the awful frown
That bends his brow the boldest eye goes down;
. . . . . .
Around his lips the subtle life that plays
Steals quaintly forth in many a jesting phrase;
A lightsome nature, not so hard to chafe,
Pleasant when pleased; rough-handled, not so safe;
Some tingling memories vaguely I recall,
But to forgive him. God forgive us all! -O.W.Holmes 2

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1. J.W.Riley, Op. cit., p.37
2. O.W.Holmes, Op. cit., p.257

Riley's poem is expressed in plain, unsophisticated language, typical of the school-boy, and calls forth the "homely common chuckle of humanity"; instead of imagery of which he is usually very fond, we have the simplicity of language representing plain facts; and sound is the predominating factor-the sound of the pencils, the pen, the clock, and the beating hearts. A school-boy might have written it-it is so simple.

What do we have in Holmes's poem? Felicitous phrasing, such as, "tingling memories", that tickles the fancy, forceful imagery depicting the wrinkles as "prints of worrying cares", and pertinent epigrammatic sayings such as,"uneasy lies the head of all that rule", are some of the factors that make this poem humorous, but also distinctive for its wit, the element that is missing from the poetry of Riley.

In this chapter, the writer has hoped to prove that:

(1) Holmes is more closely akin to Field in the domain of wit and humor than to Lowell or to Riley;

(2) Holmes surpasses Field in the realm of satire;

(3) Holmes excels Lowell in the field of humor;

(4) Riley is surpassed by Holmes in the field of wit;

(5) therefore, Holmes must be considered the greatest of the four American poets, outstanding in the fields of both wit and humor.[1]

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1. Cf. post., pp.110-23.

CHAPTER II

CRITICISMS OF HIS STYLE

INTRODUCTION

The pseudo-critic-editorial race
Owes no allegiance but the law of place;
Each to his region sticks through thick and thin,
Stiff as a beetle spiked upon a pin.
Plant him in Boston, and his sheet he fills
With all the slipslop of his threefold hills,
Talks as if Nature kept her choicest smiles
Within his radius of a dozen miles,
And nations waited till his next Review
Had made it plain what Providence must do.
Would you believe him, water is not damp
Except in buckets with the Hingham stamp,
And Heaven should build the walls of Paradise
Of Quincy granite lined with Wenham ice.

But Hudson's banks, with more congenial skies,
Swell the small creature to an alarming size:
A gayer pattern wraps his flowery chest,
A sham more brilliant sparkles on his breast,
An eyeglass, hanging from a gilded chain,
Taps the white leg that tips his rakish cane;
Strings of new names, the glories of the age,
Hang up to dry on his exterior page,
Titanic pygmies, shining lights obscure,
His favored sheets have managed to secure,
Whose wide renown beyond their own abode
Extends for miles along the Harlaem road;
New radiance lights his patronizing smile,
New airs distinguish his patrician style,
New sounds are mingled with his fatal hiss,
Oftenest "provincial" and "metropolis".

He cry "provincial" with imperious brow !
The half-bred rogue, that groomed his mother's cow !
Fed on coarse tubers and Aeolian beans
Till clownish manhood crept among his teens,
When after washing and unheard of pains
To lard with phrases his refractory brains,
A third-rate college licked him to the shape,
Not of the scholar, but the scholar's ape !

Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Astraea: The Balance of Illusion".

CHAPTER II

CRITICISMS OF HIS STYLE

Various are the opinions that have been advanced by the critics concerning the style of Holmes's poetry, some accusing him of gross plagiarism (which Holmes thoroughly detested and from which he considered himself entirely free), and others charging him with servile imitation.

"How closely the heroics of Dr. Holmes resemble those of Goldsmith and Pope no reader needs to be told," is the assertion of W.S.Kennedy. "As for Hood, there is a striking resemblance between his features and those of Holmes, and there is a striking general resemblance between the style and literary methods of the two in some of their humorous poems. Holmes is unique and original in matter, only his style shows the influence of Hood." [1]

Walter Jerrold scorns the idea proposed by Mr. Kennedy that Holmes's chief master, the man by whom his style was most influenced, was Thomas Hood. He claims that there may be a similarity in meter, but there the similarity ends. "Both Hood and Holmes are true humorists- both of them have touched alike the springs of laughter and the source of tears," declares Mr. Jerrold.[2]

If there is a great deal in Holmes's poetry that reminds one of William Spencer, of Crabbe, Pope, Hood, and the Prize Poets of the English Universities, it is only natural

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1. W.S.Kennedy, Oliver Wendell Holmes, p. 287.
2. Walter Jerrold, Oliver Wendell Holmes, p.41.

that we find traces of them in his early poems for these were the popular poets when he was a boy and during his college years.[1] Holmes himself admits in his "Introduction to Poetry: a Metrical Essay" that the poem presents the simple and partial views of a young man trained after the school of classical English verse as represented by Pope, Goldsmith, and Campbell with whose lines his memory was early stocked.[2]

It is natural and logical that a youthful poet should express himself in forms with which he is familiar, trying out the various forms by the process of evolution until he finds the pattern for the best expression of his thought. How seldom it is that even a budding genius originates a pattern of his own! The singular measure found in "The Last Leaf" Holmes admitted was an echo of Campbell's "Battle of the Baltic". It is amusing to know that Holmes chose it because a few young writers were imitating him. In the introduction to this famous poem, written when Holmes was only twenty-two, he says, "I determined to write in a measure which would at once betray any copyist."[3] By submitting the last two lines of the two poems, the similarity in meter can readily be established:

By the wild and stormy steep,
Elsinore. - Campbell.

At the old forsaken bough
Where I cling. -Holmes.

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1. W.S.Kennedy, Op. cit., pp. 284-285.
2. O.W.Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.15.
3. Ibid., p.4.

It has been said by other critics that we have to go back to the days of Dryden and Pope, or at least to that of Goldsmith for poetry to which that of Holmes is most closely akin. In his didactic couplets we may find, frequently, perhaps, passages suggestive of the earlier writers, and "for forceful directness, combined with simplicity of expression," we might find many lines parallel with those of Oliver Goldsmith, but the humor of Dryden and Pope was the grim humor of the satirist, and not of that harmless kind whose "lambent light" plays around so much of Holmes's writings.

Fond as he is of the dignified heroic couplet, he will make it sing of things that would have shocked not alone "manly Dryden" or "precise" Pope, but even poor,"rollicking" Noll Goldsmith.[1] For instance, when he has received a"Modest Request" for a speech, a song, and a toast, all on the same occasion, the incongruity of using the dignified couplet, as a vehicle of expression, for making a comparison between the thirsty sailor and himself, adds much to the droll situation.

> "Jack,"said my lady, "is it grog you'll try,
> Or punch, or toddy, if perhaps you're dry?"
> "Oh," said the sailor,"though I can't refuse,
> You know, my lady, 'taint for me to choose-
> "I'll take the grog to finish off my lunch,
> And drink the toddy-while you mix the punch." [2]

Because the Boston singer found the heroic couplet the most suitable vehicle for expressing his thought, we find

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1. W.C.Lawton, The New England Poets, pp. 233-254.

2. O.W.Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.37.

him making use of it very frequently, but not to the exclusion of other verse patterns.[1] Very wittily he used the couplet in"Poetry: A Metrical Essay" and in one stanza gives the reason for his choice:

> Poets, like painters, their machinery claim,
> And verse bestows the varnish and the frame;
> Our grating English, whose Teutonic jar
> Shakes the racked axle of Art's rattling car,
> Fits like mosaic in the lines that gird
> Fast in its place each many-angled word. [2]

George B. Woodbury claims that Holmes never attempted the modern style in poetry; there are no "native wood-notes wild" in his range, nothing in the pastoral line, nothing of Keats or the later Romanticists; he was the poet of society; and he found it convenient and perhaps necessary to continue in the somewhat mechanical measures of the past; which are best fitted for artificial and occasional verse.[3]

There is much more scope for confuting Mr. Woodbury's statement, if it were not necessary to restrict our discussion to the limited field of wit and humor. Within this range we are not expected, it is hoped, to find "native wood-notes wild" or anything "in the pastoral line". Are these, anyway, some of the essential tenets in the criteria of critics for formulating their opinions as to whether or not a poet is modern ? Furthermore, is modern poetry of the

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1 Infra., pp.27,36,62,76,82,83,105,121.
2 O.W. Holmes, op. cit., p.17.
3 George E. Woodbury, Literary Memoirs of the Nineteenth Century,p.298.

later Romanticists, in all its manifestations, the highest of its type, and therefore a standard for measuring Holmes's poetry? The following article, written by Mr. Woodbury, in another of his books, will help us to answer these questions, as it appears that Mr. Woodbury is guilty of inconsistency, or, within the space of a year, he has made a decided change in his point of view ; for, claims Mr. Woodbury:

> A man's character, or what is more profound, his temperament, acting in conjunction with the memory it has built up for itself, is a controlling force in artistic work, and modifies it in the sense that exists in his personality, in his apprehension of it, and its meaning. 1

Assuredly, this is a very satisfactory criterion by which to judge the art of Holmes; for, since his memory was stocked with classical ideas, and because his personality was genial and fun-loving, the style and thought in his poetry are very logical results of these factors.

Furthermore, Mr. Woodbury,perhaps unintentionally, upholds the standards of style in Holmes's poetry by his own admission that :

> Out of these changes of time, in response to the varying moods of men in respect to the world they inhabit, arise these phases of art which are described as classical and romantic, words of much confusion. It has been attempted to distinguish the latter as having an element of remoteness, of surprise, of curiosity; but to me, at least, classical art has the same remoteness, the same surprise, and answers the same curiosity as romantic art. If I were to endeavor to oppose them I should say that classical art is clear, it is perfectly grouped in form, it satisfies the intellect, it

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1. George E. Woodbury, Heart of Man and Other Papers, p.108.

> awakes an emotion absorbed by itself, it definitely guides the will; romantic art is touched with mystery, it has richness and intricacy of form not fully comprehended, it suggests more than it satisfies, it stirs an unconfined and wandering emotion, it invigorates an adventurous will; classicism is whole in itself and lives in the central region, the white light, of that star of ideality which is the light of our knowledge; romanticism borders on something else--the rosy corona round about our star, carrying on its dawning power into those unknown infinities which embosom the spark of life. The two have always existed in conjunction, the romantic element in ancient literature being very large.[1]

That these two elements- classicism and romanticism- exist in conjunction in some of Holmes's humorous poetry will be one of the points to prove later in the thesis.[2] Let it suffice for the present to say, that many good reasons for Mr. Holmes's choice of style are self-evident from the analysis made by the foregoing conclusion.

It will be part of this thesis to prove also that Mr. Holmes's style is mainly classical-"touched with the white light of knowledge" and colored, at times, with the "rosy hues"of romanticism.[3] If Holmes adopted the heroic couplet, a vehicle of thought so appropriate for the witty and the humorous, and so characteristic of the neo-classicist Pope, Mr. Woodbury should not condemn Holmes's poetry as artificial on these grounds, nor condemn the range of Holmes's poetry as narrow because of the "narrow compass of his verse forms". Part of the thesis will be devoted to illustrating by example

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1. Ibid., p.135.
2. Cf. post, Chapter III.
3. Cf. post, Chapter III.

other verse patterns successfully employed by Holmes.[1]

In casting any aspersions on Holmes' poetry for its resemblance to eighteenth-century verse, Mr. Woodbury is not consistent, for he has written an interesting paragraph in which he professes admiration for the work accomplished by the eighteenth-century school of poets :

> The magnificently accomplished school of the eighteenth century gave to English an age of cultivated repose, in which Pope, its best example, lived on the incomes of the past, and, together with the younger and the elder men he knew, exhibited in literature that conserving and positive power which is the economy of national genius; but even in that great century, wherever the future woke, there was a budding romanticism, in Collins, Gray, Walpole, Thomson, Cooper, Blake. [2]

It will be well, at this point, to learn what Holmes himself thought of the modern poet and nineteenth-century literature; and perhaps, the following excerpts from Over the Teacups will indicate best his conceptions of the new literary trends.

In speaking of Walt Whitman as a representative of the new trend in literature, Holmes states :

> He takes into his hospitable vocabulary words which no English dictionary recognizes as belonging to the language,- words which will be looked for in vain outside of his own pages. He accepts as poetical subjects, all things alike, common and unclean, without discrimination, miscellaneous as the contents of the sheet which Peter saw let down from heaven....

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1. Supra, footnote on p.18.
2. George E. Woodbury, op. cit. p. 236.

> I confess I am not in sympathy with some of the movements that accompany the manifestations of American social and literary independence... So far as concerns literary independence, if we understand by that term the getting rid of our subjection to British criticism ... we may consider it pretty well established. If it means dispensing with punctuation, coining words at will, self-revelation unrestrained by a sense of what is decorous, declamations in which everything is glorified without being idealized,"poetry" in which the reader must make the rhythms which the poet has not made for him, then I think we had better continue literary colonists. 1

In terseness of expression, facility of phrasing, and a sense of what is decorous, "Holmes is truly Horatian in execution",filing his verses again and again, according to the tenets of the classical scholar, so that it must have been very distatsteful to him to find, in contemporary literature, evidence of such slovenly and slipshod style as he has enumerated. As for chastity in language- Holmes was never guilty of erring against it- his humor was never of that brand.

In support of the classic that he admires, and against the modern type, much of which he disparages, he makes the following apt comparison :

> The stream of modern literature represented by the books and periodicals on the crowded counters is a turbulent and clamorous current,dashing along among the rocks of criticism, over the pebbles of the world's daily events; trying to make itself seem and heard amidst the hoarse cries of the politicians and the rumbling wheels of traffic. The classic is a still lakelet, a mountain tarn,fed by springs that never fail,its surface never ruffled by storms,-always the same, always smiling a welcome to its visitor.

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1. O.W. Holmes, Over the Teacups, p.234.

> Such is Horace to my friend,... And what Horace is to him, Homer, or Virgil, or Dante, is to many a quiet reader, sick to death of the unending stream of book-makers. 1

Holmes preferred to show the conservatism of an aristocrat in his literary leanings, choosing to model his verse upon the clean-cut intellectual poetry of the eighteenth century; for his classical studies had not failed to do their part in the shaping of"a poet who had much of the bonhomie,finished wit, and genial satiric power of Horace".

> "The classic is healthy, the romantic sickly", declares Goethe. "Most modern productions are romantic, not because they are new, but because they are weak, morbid, and sickly;and the antique is classic,not because it is old, but because it is strong, joyous, and healthy. If we distinguish 'classic' and 'romantic' by these qualities, it will be easy to see our way clearly." 2

Thomas Peacock in his criticism of modern poetry says :

> To read the promiscuous rubbish of the present time to the exclusion of the select treasures of the past, is to substitute the worse for the better variety of the same mode of enjoyment.(And concludes) :
> It is a lamentable spectacle to see minds capable of better things,running to seed in the specious indolence of these empty, aimless mockeries of intellectual exertion. 3

He decries the fact that there are those that have abandoned the cultivation and the fate of poetry to the degenerate fry of modern rhymesters, and the Olympic judges, the magazine critics,who continue to debate and promulgate

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1. O.W. Holmes, Ibid., p.158.
2. Goethe's Conversations cited by J.H. Smith and E.W. Parks, Best Critics,p.698.
3. Peacock's Four Ages of Poetry cited by Smith &Parks op.cit. p.703.

oracles about poetry,"as if it were still what it was in the Homeric age, the all-in-all of intellectual progression". 1

"The degenerate fry of modern rhymesters" had also fed Holmes beyond the point of satiety, for we hear him confessing in The Poet at the Breakfast Table of being tired to death of having to mould his thoughts by the use of out-worn rhymes such as have been used in poor verses by would-be poets who have the "habit of chewing on rhymes without sense or soul to match them", and he longs for new materials. He says in part :

> An artist that works in marble or colors has them all to himself and his tribe, but the man who moulds his thought in verse, has to employ the materials vulgarized by everybody's use and glorify them by handling. 2

Again, in Over the Teacups, he remarks :

> Rhythm alone is a tether, and not a very long one. But rhymes are iron fetters; it is dragging a chain and ball to march under their encumbrance. . .Were you writing in prose,your imagination,your fancy, your rhetoric, your musical ear for the harmonies of language would all have full play. But there is your rhyme fastening you by the leg. 3

The cloak of rhyme was becoming so threadbare by the constant use made of it by poetasters that Holmes was finding it increasingly difficult to procure a more unique and more becoming robe to supplant the worn-out garment.

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1. J.H. Smith and E.W. Parks, Ibid., p.703
2. O.W. Holmes, Poet at the Breakfast Table, p.115.
3. O.W. Holmes, Over the Teacups, p.79.

In an introduction to his poem "Invita Minerva", he explains that when one of the ancient poets found he was trying to grind out verses which came unwillingly, the poet remarked that he was writing "Invita Minerva". Holmes then adds this statement concerning the art of rhyming :

> There are times when it seems natural enough to employ that form of expression, but it is only occasionally; and the use of it as a vehicle of the commonplace is so prevalent that one is not much tempted to select it as the medium for his thoughts and emotions. The art of rhyming has almost become a part of high-school education, and its practice is far from being an evidence of intellectual distinction. Mediocrity is as much forbidden to the poet in our days as it was in those of Horace, and the immense majority of the verses written are stamped with hopeless mediocrity. 1

Some critics may consider this statement on the part of Holmes as an admission by him in his maturity of a dislike for eighteenth-century versification, which he has been accused of imitating; but this is not so, for eighteenth-century verse, however artificial it may appear to be, in many cases, because of its lack of emotion, at least has the "evidence of intellectual distinction" to recommend it, and Holmes still found it"natural to employ that form of expression" even as late as his eighty-second year as shown in his poem "To My Old Readers", in Readings Over the Teacups, from which the following is chosen as an illustration :

> But an old story, be it false or true,
> Twice told,well told, is twice as good as new. 2

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1. O.W. Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.305.
2. Ibid., p.306.

The prevalence of the mediocre writers is very well described in Holmes's amusing satire, "Cacoethes Scribendi" :

If all the trees in all the woods were men;
And each and every blade of grass a pen;
If every leaf on every shrub and tree
Turned to a sheet of foolscap, every sea
Were changed to ink, and all earth's living tribes
Had nothing else to do but act as scribes,
And for ten thousand ages day and night,
The human race should write, and write, and write,
Till all the pens and paper were used up,
And the huge inkstand was an empty cup,
Still would the scribblers clustered round its brink
Call for more pens, more paper, and more ink. 1

Again, he describes the "would-be" poets of his day in his fascinating couplets addressed to James Russell Lowell on his seventieth birthday where he asks "Who is the Poet"? and compares the "would-be" poets of his time to the true poet, Lowell, in the following lines :

Who is the poet ? He who matches rhymes
In the last fashion of the new-born times;
Sweats over sonnets till the toil seems worse
Than heaven intended in the primal curse;
Work, duties, pleasures, every claim forgets,
To shape his rondeaus and his triolets?
Or is it he whose random venture throws
His lawless whimsies into moonstruck prose,
Where they who worship the barbarian's creed
Will find a rhythmic cadence as they read,
As the pleased rustic hears a tune, or thinks
He hears a tune, in every bell that clinks ?
Are these the poets ? Though their pens should blot
A thousand volumes, surely such are not.

Who is the poet ? He whom Nature chose
In that sweet season when she made the rose.
. . . . . .
He is the poet who can stoop to read
The secret hidden in a wayside wood;
Whom June's warm breath with childlike rapture fills,
Whose spirit dances with the daffodils;

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1. O.W. Holmes, Ibid., p.300

Whom noble deeds with noble thoughts inspire
And lend his verse the true Promethean fire;
Who drinks the waters of enchanted streams
That wind and wander through the land of dreams;
For him the unreal is the real world;
Its fairer flowers with brighter dews impearled,
He looks a mortal till he spreads his wings,-
He seems an angel when he soars and sings !
Behold the poet ! Heaven his days prolong,
Whom Elmwood's nursery cradled into song! 1

Dr. Holmes received an enormous amount of correspondence from poetasters whose "idle strains" often aggravated him beyond endurance, and although he answered each letter in a kindly manner, his contempt for poetasters, as a whole, is shown in "A Familiar Letter to Several Correspondents", some stanzas of which are quoted here :

Yes, write if you want to, there's nothing like trying;
Who knows what a treasure your casket may hold ?
I'll show you that rhyming's as easy as lying,
If you'll listen to me while the art I unfold.

Here's a book full of words;one can choose as he fancies,
As a painter his tint, as a workman his tool;
Just think ! all the poems and plays and romances
Were drawn out of this, like the fish from a pool !

You can wander at will through its syllabled mazes,
And take all you want,-not a copper they cost,-
What is there to hinder your picking out phrases
For an epic as clever as "Paradise Lost" ?

Don't mind if the index of sense is at zero,
Use words that run smoothly, whatever they mean;
Leander and Lillian and Lillibulero
Are much the same thing in the rhyming machine.

There are words so delicious their sweetness will smother
That boarding-school flavor of which we're afraid,-
There is "lush" is a good one, and "swirl" is another,-
Put both in one stanza, its fortune is made.

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1. Ibid., p. 294.

With musical murmurs and rhythmical closes
You can cheat us of smiles when you've nothing to tell;
You hand us a nosegay of milliner's roses,
And we cry with delight,"Oh,how sweet they do smell !"

Perhaps you will answer all needful conditions
For winning the laurels to which you aspire,
By docking the tails of the two prepositions
I' the style o' the bards you so greatly admire.

As for subjects of verse, they are only too plenty
For ringing the changes on metrical chimes;
A maiden, a moonbeam, a lover of twenty
Have filled the great basket with bushels of rhymes.

Let me show you a picture,-'tis far from irrelevant-
By a famous old hand in the art of design;
'Tis only a photographed sketch of an elephant,
The name of the draughtsmen was Rembrandt of Rhine.

How easy ! no troublesome colors to lay on,
It can't have fatigued him,-nn, not in the least-
A dash here and there with a hap-hazard crayon,
And there stands the wrinkled-skinned,baggy-limbed beast.

Just so with your verse,- 'tis as easy as sketching,-
You can reel off a song without knitting your brow,
As lightly as Rembrandt, a drawing or etching;
It is nothing at all, if you only know how.

. . . . . .

No will of your own with its puny compulsion
Can summon the spirit that quickens the lyre;
It comes, if at all, like the Sibyl's convulsion
And touches the brain with a finger of fire. 1

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1. Ibid., p.232.

In summarizing the foregoing comments of critics and of the poet himself, we are able to deduce the following facts :(1) that the influence of Hood and Pope on Holmes is traceable in his meter only; (2) that youthful poets seldom devise metrical patterns of their own, and it was natural for Holmes to make use of those patterns with which he was most familiar; (3) that the heroic couplet was chosen by him as the most suitable vehicle for his humorous verse; (4) that the intellectual Holmes preferred to model his poetry on the classic, which is strong, joyous, and healthy, as temperament acting in conjunction with memory is a controlling force in artistic work; (5) that Holmes himself was violently opposed to doggerel versification and modern rhymesters; (6) that certain phases of the new trends in modern literature were distasteful to him, because they did not appear decorous to either a scholar-poet or to a gentleman; (7) that we should feel deeply indebted to Holmes for upholding classical literary traditions and not succumbing to certain evils of the new romanticism; (8) that classicism has always existed in conjunction with romanticism; (9) that Holmes is a classicist with romantic tendencies.

CHAPTER III

THE POET, CLASSICIST AND ROMANTICIST

INTRODUCTION

It detracts nothing from Chaucer that we can trace in him the influences of Dante and Boccaccio; nothing from Spenser that he calls Chaucer master; nothing from Shakespeare that he acknowledged how dear Spenser was to him; nothing from Milton that he brought fire from Hebrew and Greek altars. There is no degradation in such indebtedness. Venerable rather is this apostolic succession, and inspiring to all the *vitai lampada* passed thus from consecrated hand to hand.

James Russell Lowell, "Nationality in Literature".

CHAPTER III

THE POET, CLASSICIST AND ROMANTICIST

In the preceding chapter on the style of Holmes's poetry, the fact that he is a classicist with romantic tendencies was indicated; in this chapter this statement will be proved, as well as the fact that he is a true poet.

It would be well first to determine as satisfactorily as possible the main difference between the two theories, classicism and romanticism; and for the purpose, Walter Pater's "Postscript to Appreciation" will be used in part :

> The words classical and romantic, although, like many other critical expressions, sometimes abused by those who have understood them too vaguely or too absolutely, yet define two tendencies in the history of art and literature. . . . . The term "classical",fixed as it is, to a well-defined literature, and a well-defined group in art, is clear, indeed; but then it has often been used in a hard, and merely scholastic sense. . . . . .
>
> And as the term,"classical",has been used in a too absolute, and therefore in a misleading sense, so the term,"romantic", has been used much too vaguely, in various accidental senses. . . . . .
>
> The romantic spirit is, in reality, an ever-present,an enduring principle,in the artistic temperament; and the qualities of thought and style which that, and other similar uses of the word "romantic" really indicate, are indeed but symptoms of a very continuous and widely working influence....
>
> The "classic" comes to us out of the cool and quiet of other times, as the measure of what a long experience has shown will at least never displease us. . . . . the essentially classical element is that quality of order in beauty, . . . in

a preeminent degree. . . . . .

It is the addition of strangeness to beauty that constitutes the romantic character in art, and the desire of beauty being a fixed element in every artistic organization, it is the addition of curiosity to this desire of beauty, that constitutes the romantic temper. Curiosity and the desire of beauty, have each their place in art, as in all true criticism. . . . To turn always with that ever-changing spirit, yet to retain the flavor of what was admirably done in past generations, in the classics,as we say-is the problem of true romanticism.

Romanticism ... is in its essential characteristics rather a spirit which shows itself at all times, in various degrees, in individual workmen and their work;and the amount of which criticism has to estimate in them taken one by one,than the peculiarity of a time or school, ...it must always be partly a matter of individual temperament.

To Sainte-Beuve, who understands the term (classicism) in a more liberal sense, it is the characteristic of certain epochs,of certain spirits in every epoch,not given to the exercise of original imagination,but rather to the working out of refinement of manner on some authorized matter; and who bring to their perfection,in this way, the elements of sanity, of order, and beauty in manner. . . . .

To discriminate schools, of art,of literature,is,of course, part of the obvious business of literary criticism; but, in the work of literary production, it is easy to be overmuch occupied concerning them. For,in truth, the legitimate contention is,not of one age or school of literary art against another, but of all successive schools alike,against the stupidity which is dead to the substance,and the vulgarity which is dead to form.1

In brief,then,the contention concerning Holmes as a poet is whether or not he is guilty (1) of stupidity in disregard to that particular "substance" which represents romanticism; (2) of vulgarity in not following the classical

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1. Walter Pater, Postscript to Appreciation,cited by James H. Smith and E.W.Parks, The Great Critics,p.735.

traditions of literary art.

If we find him observant in his literary practices of the best tenets held by the romanticists and the classicists, in their doctrines for creating poetry of the most satisfactory type, we must be willing to accept the inevitable conclusion that Holmes is a real poet, a classicist, and a romanticist.

"Logic is logic
That's all I say."

As early as 1836, when Holmes was only twenty-seven years of age, he expressed his conception of the poet in his introduction to "Poetry,A Metrical Essay," read before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, Harvard University. The poem itself deals chiefly with the constructive side of poetry, but in this introduction he is careful to state the qualities which he believes make the poet. His ideas are expressed as follows :

> That which makes him a poet is not the power of writing melodious rhymes, it is not the possession of ordinary human sensibilities nor even of both these qualities in connection with each other. I should rather say, if I were now called upon to define it, it is the power of transfiguring the experiences and shows of life into an aspect which comes from his imagination and kindles that of others. Emotion is its stimulus and language furnishes its expression; but these are not all, as some might infer was the doctrine of the poem before the reader.
>
> A common mistake made by young persons who suppose themselves to have the poetical gift is that their own spiritual exaltation finds a true expression in the conventional phrases which are borrowed from the voices of the singers whose inspiration they think they share.

> Looking at this poem as an expression of some aspects of the "ars poetica", with some passages which I can read even at this mature period of life without blushing for them, it may stand as the most serious representation of my early efforts. 1

It would seem then that Mr. Holmes very early in life had formed a pretty accurate conception of what constitutes poetry; for according to the first requirement made in this passage-"the power of taking the experiences and shows of life and transfiguring them"- is also one of the tenets expressed in the doctrine of Wordsworth concerning what constitutes poetry. In Wordsworth's "Observations" we find the words - "choose incidents and situations from common life and throw over them a certain coloring of the imagination". 2

The second requirement made by Holmes that emotion is the stimulus for the kindling of the imagination of others- is also supported by Mr. Wordsworth's words-"for all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of feelings". 3

Mr. Holmes's attack on "conventional phrases", borrowed from others, as not being the "true expression" to represent "spiritual exaltation" is supported by Wordsworth who took pains to avoid "what is usually called poetic diction" on the grounds that he wished to keep his language "near to the

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1. O.W.Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.15.
2. Wordsworth's Observations, cited by J.H.Smith and E.W.Parks, op. cit., p.500.
3. Ibid., p.501.

language of men". 1

In fact, Holmes observes in his poetry, the very requirements that are so dear to Wordsworth--elimination of abstract ideas, keeping the Reader in the company of flesh and blood, little falsehood of description, abstaining from the use of many expressions foolishly repeated by bad poets, making use of language that is similar to prose, and using meter that is "regular and uniform" instead of"the arbitrary diction subject to infinite caprices". Wordsworth enjoys, as well as Holmes, the "charm which,by the consent of all nations, is acknowledged to exist in this metrical language"- " the continual and regular impulses of pleasurable surprise from the metrical arrangement". Wordsworth also states that a judicious choice of meter will greatly add to the feelings of pleasure which the Reader experiences. 2

How judiciously Holmes chose his meters !

Wordsworth, furthermore, describes the very qualities which can be ascribed to Holmes, when in formulating his definition of a poet he says :

> A poet is a man speaking to men; a man,it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions,and who

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1. Ibid., p.503.

2. Ibid., pp. 504-518.

> rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions, as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. ..... an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves;- whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels. 1
>
> Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing; it is so; its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion. 2
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in this manner. But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men. 3

The foregoing excerpts from Mr. Wordsworth's "Observations" will serve a double purpose: first, since Mr. Wordsworth is a Romanticist, he has furnished us criteria for proving that Dr. Holmes has many traits of the Romanticists; second, that judged by the qualifications furnished by Mr. Wordsworth, Dr. Holmes is a true poet.

By the selection of what is considered one of the

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1. Ibid., p.507.

2. Ibid., pp.507-508.

3. Ibid., p.500.

greatest of Holmes's poems, loved by Lincoln and admired by Poe, namely, "The Last Leaf", and applying Mr. Wordsworth's theories as our criteria, it is hoped by this little lyrical "classic" (since space will not allow a wealth of evidence to be submitted) to prove that Holmes is a true poet and one with romantic tendencies.

THE LAST LEAF

I saw him once before,
As he passed by the door,
And again
The pavement stones resound,
As he totters o'er the ground
With his cane.

They say that in his prime,
Ere the pruning knife of Time
Cut him down,
Not a better man was found
By the Crier on his round
Through the town.

But now he walks the streets,
And he looks at all he meets
Sad and wan,
And he shakes his feeble head,
That it seems as if he said,
"They are gone".

The mossy marbles rest
On the lips that he has prest
In their bloom,
And the names he loves to hear
Have been carved for many a year
On the tomb.

My grandmamma has said-
Poor old lady, she is dead
Long ago-
That he had a Roman nose,
And his cheek was like a rose
In the snow;

But now his nose is thin,
And it rests upon his chin,
Like a staff,
And a crook is in his back,
And a melancholy crack
In his laugh.

I know it is a sin
For me to sit and grin
At him here;
But the old three-cornered hat,
And the breeches, and all that,
Are so queer !

And if I should live to be
The last leaf upon the tree
In the spring,
Let them smile as I do now,
At the old forsaken bough
Where I cling. 1

First of all, Holmes selects an experience he had in his everyday life when he was a young man-that of seeing a feeble old man, walking with a cane, and wearing outmoded garments, tottering down the street. The young man is "in the spring" of his years. At first, Holmes has two pictures in his mind's eye, the youth or himself, and the old man. Then Holmes thinks of a third picture, which is that of the old fellow when he was a very personable young man with his handsome Roman nose and his school-girl complexion. The pictures are so incongruous that the emotion of amusement arises in him; and then further colored by his imagination, another picture appears in his imagination, that of early spring when one withered leaf is still clinging to its bough (after weathering the storms of autumn

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1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.4.

and winter), while the new growths of spring are bursting their buds and spreading their foliage all around it. Here he has another incongruous situation, and Holmes by using the coloring of his imagination transfigures his experience; for the one withered leaf is so evidently useless, although like the old man there is still a "clinging" to life that now has become so hopeless and meaningless that Holmes's feelings of amusement are tinctured with a pathos so tender that finally they mingle and become one producing that philosophical reflection concerning life: the common lot of mankind is that of growing old and useless. But by putting himself in the other fellow's place, he not only produces a feeling of sympathy in himself for the common fate of all mankind, but also in the reader- that "spontaneous overflow of feelings" indicated by Wordsworth.

So much for the thought which is typically of the Wordsworth brand; as far as the style is concerned, we have the poet using the language of everyday life ; there are no abstract ideas, no conventional phrases. The description is truthful, the expressions are clear and forceful, and the language similar to prose. Holmes has not been guilty of the "language of bad poets", there are no literary conceits, the meter is charming and the poem lyrical in its sweetness. The meter is beautifully appropriate, for you can hear the "pavement stones resounding"

in the "blows" of the rhythm, while the two short lines in each stanza (which lack the number of beats of the other lines) appear to represent that a loss in blows is due to the old man's tottering or pausing to take breath or a rest. This was one point Wordsworth definitely insisted on- "good choice of meter, unusual but appropriate".

Here we definitely have a man speaking to men, with a lively sensibility, enthusiasm, tenderness, and a knowledge of human nature. The genial Holmes has the power to conjure up humor, pity, and sympathy, for he is well able to express what he feels, and he knows in his comprehensive soul, that his thoughts and feelings are the general feelings of others.

This illustration serves as a good example of classical restraint, as there is nothing in it savoring of any sentimentality; it is an excellent example of Holmes's ability as a poet in the highest realm of humor; and it shows that he could write a poem having the best traits of romanticism written in a classical style, that Horace himself would approve. "A single lyric is enough, if one can only find in his soul and finish in his intellect one of those jewels fit to sparkle'on the stretched forefinger of all time'",[1] declares Holmes.

Since the foregoing conclusions are based only on Holmes's and Wordsworth's definitions of what constitutes

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1. J.H. Smith and E.W. Parks, The Great Critics,(See index of book for critics quoted).

a poet, it seems advisable to furnish ideas from other great critics concerning this much discussed question. As there is not sufficient space to treat these in detail excerpts will be quoted and applied to one other poem by Holmes. These excerpts are as follows :

1. Good Sense is the Body of poetic genius, Fancy its Drapery, Motion its Life, and Imagination the Soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.

   - Coleridge.

2. A poem is the very image of life expressed in its external truth. Poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man.

   - Shelley.

3. Poetry is the record of the best and the happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

   - Shelley.

4. A poem or story should produce a single effect, which requires a perfect unity secured by a harmonious arrangement of parts.

   - Poe.

5. The light of poetry is not only a direct,but also a reflected light, that, while it shows us the object, throws a sparkling radiance all around it.

   - Hazlitt.

6. Christianity leads poetry to the truth. The starting-point of religion is always the starting-point of poetry.

   - Hugo.

7. There is a rarer thing than truth,-namely, power, or deep sympathy with truth.

   - De Quincey.

8. The Scriptures speak not of the understanding, but of the understanding heart.

- De Quincey.

9. A poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession-his speech flows with his flowing nature. In every word he speaks he rides on them as the horses of thought.

- Emerson.

The poem, to which the foregoing criteria will be applied, is that masterpiece of Holmes's, "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay", only portions of which will be quoted in order to conserve space.

Point 1 : "The Deacon's Masterpiece,or The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay" is an excellent example of "Good Sense with Fancy as its Drapery and Imagination the Soul that is everywhere and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole".

According to Holmes himself :

> This poem is a perfectly intelligible conception, whatever material difficulties it presents. It is conceivable that a being of an order superior to humanity should so understand the conditions of matter that he could construct a machine which should go to pieces... at a given moment of the future. The mind may take a certain pleasure in this picture of the impossible. 1

The poem certainly sounds sensible, fancy and imagination are used throughout,and the poem forms a graceful and intelligent whole.

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1. O. W. Holmes, OP. cit., p.158.

You see, of course, if you're not a dunce,
How it went to pieces all at once,-
All at once, and nothing first,-
Just as bubbles do when they burst.
. . . . . .
End of the wonderful one-hoss shay.
Logic is logic. That's all I say.

Point 2 : A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. Poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man.

Holmes wrote "The Deacon's Masterpiece" as a satire on Calvinist Theologians, who, according to Holmes, arrive at their conclusions with impeccable logic, but in their "algebra of human nature...friction and strength (or weakness) of material are left out".[1] Similarly, there is nothing logically wrong with the story of the One-Hoss Shay. The total effect, therefore, is a parable showing the limitations not only of one logical system, but of all systems in which problems are worked out in intellectual vacuums- without, that is, "primary relations with truth".[2]

Point 3 : Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Through this poem, as well as others, Holmes's attack on Calvinism was a potent weapon for bringing the many rigid and inhumane doctrines of Calvinism into disrepute. The kindly spirit of the Doctor could not bear the gloom

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1. O.W. Holmes, Elsie Venner, p.321.
2. Loc. cit.

of his many patients in the countryside, and in one of his best and happiest moments he found his cure-all in his humorous poems.

> The parson was working his Sunday's text;
> Had got to fifthly, and stopped perplexed
> At what the -Moses- was coming next.

Point 4 :

> A poem or story should produce a single effect, which requires a perfect unity secured by a harmonious arrangement of parts.

Needless to say, we have one single effect- the fallacy of logic when used " without its primary relations with truth" and the " harmonious arrangement of the parts" - represented by the process of getting materials together as practiced by the Deacon, for the building of the chaise, which certainly produced a perfect unity in the result achieved :

> "There !" said the Deacon,"naow she'll dew !"
> Do ! I tell you, I ruther guess
> She was a wonder, and nothing less !

Point 5 :

> The light of poetry is not only a direct but also a reflected light, that, while it shows us the object, throws a sparkling radiance all around it.

Holmes not only entertained us with the facts concerning the building of the wonderful chaise, but by using his genial humor and unsurpassed wit, he threw "a sparkling radiance all around it".

> But the Deacon swore(as Deacons do,
> With an "I dew vum", or an "I tell yeou"),
> He would build one shay to beat the taown
> 'n' the keounty 'n' all the kentry raoun';

Point 6 :

Christianity leads poetry to the truth. The starting-point of religion is always the starting-point of poetry.

Holmes used some of the most irrational tenets of Calvinism as a source of some of his best satires, because he felt, by this method he could "cure" people of some of the beliefs associated with Calvinism which to him represented mere heathenism.

You see, of course, if you're not a dunce,
How it went to pieces all at once,-

Point 7 :

There is a rarer thing than truth,-namely, power, or deep sympathy with truth. The Scriptures speak not of the understanding, but of the understanding heart.

Holmes knew that his people needed fun, and because of his deep sympathy with this truth, he was determined, by means of his humorous poems to get rid of morbid introspection characteristic of many of his friends in the country.

Little of all we value here
Wakes on the morn of its hundredth year
Without both feeling and looking queer.

First a shiver, and then a thrill
Then something decidedly like a spill,-
And the parson was sitting upon a rock,
At half-past nine by the meet'n'-house clock,-
Just the hour of the Earthquake shock !

Point 8 :

A poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all the things in their right series and procession-his speech flows with his flowing nature. In every word he speaks he rides on them as the horses of thought.

Holmes turned the floodlights of his intellect on the gloomy atmosphere of New England, diagnosed the disease, and with the prancing movement of his heroic couplets, each word became the galloping horse of his thought.

> Colts grew horses, beards turned gray,
> Deacon and deaconess dropped away,
> Children and grandchildren- where were they ?
> But there stood the stout old one-hoss shay
> As fresh as on Lisbon-earthquake-day !

The heathenish beliefs of hyper-Calvinism were still in vogue !

Later-

> There are traces of age in the one-hoss shay,
> A general flavor of mild decay,
> But nothing local as one may say.
> There couldn't be,-for the Deacon's art
> Had made it so like in every part
> That there wasn't a chance for one to start.

The Deacon had proved all the tenets of his doctrine, <u>logically</u>, by applying Scripture, but, nevertheless, people were waking up ! Soon the masterpiece would go to pieces, all at once, like a bubble !

Surely these points prove Holmes a poet- logic is logic !

If nineteenth-century criticism is passé, let us turn to a critic of the twentieth century. Van Wyck Brooks declares :

> The doctor was a poet, for all he could "write so funny", a solid poet whose fruit was never green. He had observed that American poets did not ripen well. They lacked severe standards; they had no sound thermometers for gauging their talents... A poem was like a violin, the parts of which were strangers to one another till they had learned to vibrate in harmony..

> One had to keep one's poem until its sentiment harmonized with all the aspects of one's life and nature... So it was with the doctor's poems. Whatever else they were, they were always ripe. If they were largely occasional, and largely local,what else could be expected of a harper who could never refuse the appeal "by request of friends"? He knew his audience:
>
> "All the gay and young
> Love the light antics of a playful tongue". [1]

Although spontaneity was a birthright, he did not, therefore, disregard or flout at traditional forms and accepted standards. On the contrary, he showed unmistakably that he belonged to the order of poets, not to the disorder of the "poetic mob".

It is unfair to Holmes to classify him as a mere writer of society verses, for that is too low an estimate of his best work. He has written some of the finest society verses, but these are not his most characteristic pieces. As one critic well expresses it :

> Holmes knows the life of society,and he knows how to describe that life; and yet he is able to rise above it, and to consider it from a higher point of view. This it is which marks even his most trifling verses: that they probe social existence to its core, and that they are not content with its own passing humors. His personal poems and his college poems have a more serious purpose than the exposure of social defects. They have as much of pathos as of humor, and they have as much of wisdom as of wit. [2]

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1. Van Wyck Brooks, The Flowering of New England, p.354.

2. George W. Cooke, "Oliver W. Holmes", New England Magazine (October,1889), p.117.

The truth of this remark is well indicated in that earliest of the many class poems, "Bill and Joe", where the humor is well concealed under the disguise of a "ripened wisdom".

> How Bill forgets his hour of pride,
> While Joe sits smiling at his side;
> How Joe, in spite of time's disguise,
> Finds the old schoolmate in his eyes,-
> Those calm, stern eyes that melt and fill
> As Joe looks fondly up at Bill.
> . . . . . .
> Ah, pensive scholar, what is fame ?
> A fitful tongue of leaping flame;
> A giddy whirlwind's fickle gust,
> That lifts a pinch of mortal dust;
> A few swift years, and who can show
> Which dust was Bill and which was Joe? 1

Dr. Holmes has found his themes, in fact, everywhere, as he says in one of his books that the poet ought; but most of all he found them in the heart, and to the heart they have all been sent- a sure guarantee of his enduring fame. He felt that a poet should reproduce himself in his creation, and if he faithfully did this, he would go down to posterity with all his personality blended with whatever is imperishable in his song. No other poet did this better than Holmes, for his sunny poems are characteristic of his sunny disposition.

Wherever you turn in Holmes's book of poetry, you will find the evidence of his training in the classical school of literature, and the use of the heroic couplet by him is very frequent. And why not ? For after all, the heroic rhymed

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1. O.W. Holmes, op. cit., p. 113.

couplet is the simplest form of English verse music, supple, flexible, made for easy simile and compact metaphor and with the ability of rising to lyric loftiness. As one critic points out :

> It is the natural shell of an epigram, it lends itself so perfectly to the sudden flash of wit or turn of humor; it compels the poet to practice all the virtues of brevity, checking his wandering fancy, and repressing the secondary thought, requiring in a masterly use of it, the employment of more mental powers than any other metrical form. It is despised and neglected now, because much of the literature which is embodied in it, is despised and neglected; yet, it is the best metrical form which intelligence, as distinct from poetical feeling, can employ. 1

We have many reasons listed here for Mr. Holmes's favorite vehicle of expression, and he was superior in his use of it to those whose couplets may be despised now; for to it, he gave not only his intellectual qualities, but also poetical feelings. He knew how to handle it in a masterful manner, as demonstrated by his description of the scholar:

> Here is the patient scholar; in his looks
> You read the titles of his learned books;
> What classic lore those spidery crow's feet speak !
> What problems figure in that wrinkled cheek !
> For never thought but left its stiffened trace,
> Its fossil footprint on the plastic face,
> As the swift record of a raindrop stands,
> Fixed on the tablet of the hardening sands.
> On every face as on the written page
> Each year renews the autograph of age;
> One trait alone may wasting years defy,-
> The fire still lingering in the poet's eye. 2

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1. George E.Woodbury, Literary Essays, p.12.

2. O.W.Holmes, Op. cit., p.277.

How compact these lines are with similes and metaphors! Every couplet shows a flash of wit or turn of humor and through it all are gleaming the brilliance of his intellect, and the sunny disposition of the man ! One authority declares:

> Instead of abandoning the style of the Augustans,as Bryant and Lowell abandoned or outgrew it, he chose rather to perfect himself in it; until, somewhat more plastic than it was in his models, somewhat modernized and provincial, that style became his normal accent. Having Holmes's purpose in view, one may add that no poet in America has acquired a surer control over his medium. Within this medium, he was able to unite sparkle, humor, clearness, good sense, and oratorical emphasis. [1]

Another critic has stated that Holmes was, like Goldsmith, a born sentimentalist who by humor freed himself from the excesses of the emotional spirit. His poems hark back to the eighteenth-century pieces of Gray, Prior, Swift, Cowper,et cetera.[2] In their classical restraint and similarity of meter they are akin, but there is a considerable dissimilarity in substance and mood.

Let us take Pope from the group of eighteenth-century writers for comparison with Holmes, as Pope was the chief founder of the style of writing so popular in his period, and it is with him chiefly that Holmes is to be compared. The artificial style of writing, popular with Pope, became living and powerful in his hands, because "he used it to express", according to Lowell,"artificial modes of thinking and an artificial state of society". Lowell goes on to say :

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1. Theodore Stanton, A Manual of American Literature, p.296.
2. G.Harrison Orians,A Short History of American Literature, p.104.

> Measured by any high standard of imagination, he will be found wanting; tried by any test of wit, he is unrivalled. ... His serious poetry at its best, is a succession of loosely strung epigrams, and no poet more often than he makes the second line of the couplet a mere train-bearer to the first. His more ambitious works may be defined as careless thinking carefully versified. .....
>
> I do not think that Pope's verse anywhere sings. ... The atmosphere in which he habitually dwelt was a prosaic one, the language habitual to him was that of conversation and society, so that he lacked the help of the fresher dialect which seems like inspiration in the older poets. 1

For the purposes of analogy, some couplets, taken from Pope's "Essay on Criticism", will serve to bear out the statement made by Lowell when placed side by side with couplets from Holmes's "A Rhymed Lesson".

> Nature to all things fixed the limits fit,
> And wisely curbed proud man's pretending wit.
> -Pope
> Learn then what morals critics ought to show,
> For 'tis but half a judge's task to know.
> -Pope
> Distrustful sense with modest caution speaks,
> It still looks home, and short excursions makes.
> -Pope
> Be niggards of advice on no pretense,
> For the worst avarice is that of sense.
> -Pope
>
> Children of wealth or want, to each is given
> One spot of green, and all the blue of heaven!
> -Holmes
> Let others gaze where silvery streams are rolled,
> And chase the rainbow for its cup of gold;
> -Holmes
> Grieve as thou must, o'er history's reeking page;
> Blush for the wrongs that stain thy happier age;
> -Holmes
> Be firm! One constant element in luck
> Is genuine solid old Teutonic pluck.
> -Holmes

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1. James Russell Lowell; Literary Essays, Vol.IV., p.56.

The gay spirit of the genial Holmes is prevalent in every line, which sings itself into the human heart, and the originality of sentiment, acuteness of expression, vitality, and intermittent humor are indicative of his superiority over Pope's lines, which have "bumpy" rhythm, prosaic language showing a caustic mood indicative of the pessimist Pope, and an artificiality of expression. Where Holmes's second line of each couplet heightens the intensity of the first line, Pope's second line appears as an afterthought which detracts from the first by a decline in intensity, or, in other words, there is an eclipse of his first thought, for the second line appears as a shadow passing over the first. The spirit of the two poems is as different in mood and tone as are those of the lilting strains of the lark's song from the raucous sounds of the crow's notes.

Holmes expresses the common sense of mankind in stronger language, and in addition to these qualities, his mood is sympathetic, genial, and delightful, while in clarity, melody, and vitality his couplets are far superior to Pope's.

It will be well, at this point, also to compare Holmes with Crabbe, in view of the fact that many critics think that the two are so similar in the substance of their thought, as well as in the characteristics of their style.

Mr. Woodbury calls Crabbe "the last of that long line of poets through whom the Queen Anne taste had tyrannized over England for a century in verse", and puts the question as to

why Sir Walter Scott honored Crabbe and chose Crabbe's poem to be read to him just before he died.[1] Mr. Woodbury answers his own question in the following manner:

> A realistic description has less poetic value than an imaginative one, such as was given to us by Wordsworth at his best, but Crabbe's description is perhaps the most nakedly realistic of any in English poetry and is an uncommonly good one. ... What realist in painting could exceed in truthfulness and carefulness of detail this picture of a fall morning ?
>
> "It was a fair and mild autumnal sky,
> And earth's ripe treasures met the admiring eye;
> The wet and heavy grass where feet had strayed,
> Not yet erect, the wanderer's way betrayed;
> Showers of the night had swelled the deep'ning rill,
> The morning breeze had urged the quick'ning mill;
> Long yellow leaves, from osiers strewed around, [2] "
> Choked the small streams and hushed the feeble sound.

The following realistic description by Holmes in "An Old-Year Song" matches the truthfulness and carefulness in detail of Crabbe's work, with imagination thrown in for good poetic value:

> The snow has capped yon distant hill,
> At morn the running brook was still,
> From driven herds the clouds that rise
> Are like the smoke of sacrifice;
> Erelong the frozen sod shall mock
> The ploughshare, changed to stubborn rock,
> The brawling streams shall soon be dumb,
> Sing, little bird ! the frosts have come. [3]

Mr. Woodbury goes on to say that Mr. Crabbe did not handle his heroic couplets in a masterful way; he was careless and sometimes slipshod; but when he chose, he could employ it very well. Crabbe's poetry is, as he calls it , poetry without atmosphere; it is a reflection, almost mirror-like of a

1. George E.Woodbury: Literary Essays, p.7.
2. Loc. cit. 3. O.W.Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.186.

plain fact.[1] The first accusation cannot be made against Holmes's poetry, for the filing of his verses, as we noted before, is always evident; and the second point, a lack of atmosphere, is not one either that can be applied to Holmes's poetry. The correctness and quality of his verses have much to do with the fact recorded by John Burroughs that -

> As a writer, Dr. Holmes always reminded me of certain of our bird songsters, such as the brown thrasher or the catbird, whose performances always seem to imply a spectator and to challenge his admiration. The vivacious doctor always seemed to write with his eye upon his reader, and to calculate in advance upon his reader's surprise and pleasure. [2]

There is a similarity in the two poets if we consider the human heart qualities in both, the joy of their fellow-men and real life brought home to our tears and laughter, although these qualities are less apparent in Crabbe than in Holmes. It is only when Crabbe is at his best that there is a similarity between him and Holmes. In fidelity to psychological and spiritual truth, Holmes is more like Goldsmith.

Where does Mr. Holmes the poet stand today ? "As a poet," claims Mr. Jerrold, "the position which rightfully belongs to Holmes is immediately after Longfellow in point of fame, while in popularity he is probably today the very first." [3]

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1. George E. Woodbury, Op. cit., p. 14.
2. John Burroughs, Literary Values, p.220.
3. Walter Jerrold, Oliver Wendell Holmes, p.60.

We might also ask, "With which classes of people is Holmes the most popular poet ?" and find our answer in the following opinion of Mr. Stedman who claims that there are many professional men, sensible and humane, who care little for the poetry of beauty alone; and he has observed that "lawyers, veteran judges, merry and discreet, enjoy the verse of Holmes." [1]

It was asked concerning Landor :

> Shall not the wise have their poets as well as the witless ? Shall we begrudge the wigged and gowned their rations of wit and epigrams and lettered jest ?
>
> Not the form, but the informing spirit is the essential thing, and this many people who are on the watch for American originality, fail to comprehend. [2]

Other characteristic traits of Holmes as a poet, will be discussed in the next chapter under "Holmes, the Poet of Wit and Humor." [3]

It is hoped that the present chapter has proved : (1) that Holmes is a real poet; (2) that in his inclinations as a romanticist, he shows the best attributes of the romanticists; (3) that in his use of the heroic couplet, his mode of expression, and the substance of his thoughts he outshines the neo-classicists; (4) that in his decorum, restraint, and style he is a classicist; (5) that as an American poet only one surpasses him; (6) that he is the most popular poet in America; (7) that he has an especial appeal to those of the intellectual class.

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1. Edmund C. Stedman, Poets of America, p.283.
2. Ibid., p.289.
3. Cf. post, pp.55-78.

CHAPTER IV

HOLMES, THE POET OF WIT AND HUMOR

INTRODUCTION

The comic poet is in the narrow field, or enclosed square, of the society he depicts, and he addresses the still narrower enclosure of men's intellects, with reference to the operation of the social world upon their characters. ... To understand his work and value it, you must have a sober liking of your kind and a sober estimate of our civilized qualities. ...

Whenever men wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; ...self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning shortsightedly,plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually or in the bulk -- the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.

George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy".

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We cry, we laugh; ah, life is half and half,
Now bright and joyous as a page of Herrick's,
Then chill and bare as funeral-minded Blair;
As fickle as a female in hysterics.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, "How Not to Settle It".

CHAPTER IV

HOLMES, THE POET OF WIT AND HUMOR

In making an analysis of the humor of Oliver Wendell Holmes, it is well to think of what Lowell said regarding the innate quality of humor:

> Humor taken in the sense of the faculty to perceive what is humorous, and to give it expression, seems to be greatly a matter of temperament. Hence, probably, its name. It is something quite indefinable, diffused through the whole nature of the man. -1

Humor was diffused through the whole nature of Mr. Holmes, and his sense of the ridiculous was very early an outstanding trait of his merry temperament. To those who are not oblivious of the fact that he was brought up during a period in which gloom instead of merriment was the order of the day, the measure and quality of Holmes's wit and humor appear especially astounding.

> Bostonese to the fingertips, (says Mr. Burton in speaking of Holmes) his very sense of humor saved him from taking himself and the town too seriously. To a lady who spoke admiringly to him of his famous definition of Boston as the Hub of the Universe, he replied, "And the best of it is you don't see the joke." "What do you mean ?" "That we believe it", twinkled the doctor. Was there ever keener satire ?
>
> Holmes, then, was a humorist, and no study of American humor can omit his name. His fun was that of the fine gentleman and appealed equally to the head and the heart. He had wit, that intellectual quality which sees incongruities and expresses them in such apt terms of language that a keen, mental delight follows;- but

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1. James R. Lowell, "Humor, Wit, Fun, and Satire", Function of the Poet and Other Essays, p.44.

> quite as truly, he had that atmospheric quality of humor which rests upon kindliness, exhibits temperament, and is so clearly akin to pathos that often the two blend, as does an April day of sun and shower. 1

That Holmes is our first and greatest American poet in the field of wit and humor is the point to be proved in this chapter; but, first, we shall have to disabuse ourselves of the assumption that because a writer deals with humorous subjects, he must be relegated necessarily to one of the lower rungs of that literary ladder which reaches to the highest realms of poesy. As one writer in the field of humor states :

> The world likes humor, but it treats it patronizingly. It decorates its way with Brussels sprouts. It feels that if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be something less than great, because if it were truly great, it would be serious !
>
> Writers know this, and those who take their literary selves with great seriousness are at considerable pains never to associate their names with anything funny or flippant or nonsensical or light... Here in America we have an immensely humorous people...who cherish the ideal of the 'sense of humor and at the same time are highly suspicious of anything which is non-serious'. 2

This point of view of the average person presents at least one difficulty with which we have to contend, while another is due to the fact that the day has not yet come for "the full unfolding of the American sensibility to the ludicrous". The present-day reader, accustomed to the broader

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1. Richard Burton, Literary Leaders of America, pp.210-211.
2. E.B. and K.S. White, editors, A Subtreasury of American Humor, (Preface) pp. i-xxxii.

and sometimes coarser fooling of the newspaper funny man, or to the school of humor for which Artemus Ward stands as father,is likely perhaps to find writers that represent the more intellectual type of humor a little tame. However, it should become a matter of importance to a person who wishes to be considered truly cultured to cultivate that sense of the genuinely humorous that "begets the inward smile". It does appear somewhat strange, that in order to do this, it seems necessary for us to revert to a period in our literature, approximately one hundred years ago, when our first literary standards were being formulated, and become acquainted more intimately with the two writers of humorous literature, who were of significance in forming these standards,-Washington Irving in the field of prose, and Holmes in the fields of both prose and poetry.

Lord Macaulay says,"As we call Lowell our poetical moralist, we may call Holmes our poetical humorist", and if,as Thackeray suggests, " Humor is a mixture of love and wit", truly Holmes is a humorist of a high type; for he had both love for his countrymen and the wit representative of the keenest intellect for the development of his humorous literature for their good.

In the development of this literature, he resented the suspicion that he is merely a jester more sharply than any other charge against himself; and we sometimes find a reference to this resentment in his poems and other writings.

Of his listeners Holmes said on one occasion :

> I know well enough that there are some of you who had a great deal rather see me stand on my head than use it for any purpose of thought--Well, I can't be savage with you for wanting to laugh, and I like to make you laugh well enough, when I can. But then observe this: if the sense of the ridiculous is one side of an impressible nature, it is very well; but if that is all there is in a man, he had better have been an ape at once, and so have stood at the head of his profession. 1

Speaking of this same idea regarding buffoonery, he says in The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table :

> Wonder why authors and actors are ashamed of being funny- Why, there are obvious reasons, and deep philosophical ones. The clown knows very well that the women are not in love with him, but with Hamlet, the fellow in the black coat and plumed hat. Passion never laughs. The wit knows that his place is at the tail of the procession. 2

To those who would slightingly accuse Holmes of New England provincialism and, at times, of dealing with serious matters with too much levity, Mr. Theodore Stanton replies :

> A constructive criticism will lay stress not on his inheritance of New England provincialism, or his slight tendency to be flippant, but on his kindliness, his inexhaustible good humor, his quick and darting intellectual curiosity, and on the appeal which his sprightly moralizing makes to the young. It is not a little thing to say of a wit and a power of epigram like his that they were ever genial, and ever on the side of something better than merely conventional morality. 3

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1. O.W. Holmes, Autocrat of the Breakfast Table, p.90.
2. Ibid., p.50
3. Theodore Stanton, A Manual of American Criticism, p.296.

And this is the secret of Holmes's greatness and popularity in the field of wit and humor,- his geniality and kindness at all times in the use of his intellectual gift of Wit softened by the innate humor of his temperament; others have used such powers for ulterior purposes, such as lampooning individuals whom they disliked or envied,[1] but with Holmes it was directed, when necessary, not at individuals but at evil conditions and particularly at hypocrisy; moreover, if it became very necessary, at times, for Holmes in his earnestness to become very caustic, he was a physician capable of applying a soothing ointment for the pain inflicted. The following verses from "Non-Resistance" will serve to illustrate the "button of good-nature on the weapon of his satire" :

> Perhaps too far in these considerate days
> Has patience carried her submissive ways;
> Wisdom has taught us to be calm and meek;
> To take one blow,and turn the other cheek;
> It is not written what a man should do
> If the rude caitiff smite the other,too ! [2]

In regard to the question as to whether or not Holmes's humorous poetry represents a phase of our nationalism, Mr. W. S. Kennedy says :

> Holmes is indigenous; he throws up New England subsoil as he plows; his homespun characters speak the native patois, and the whole tone of his writings is racily and unaffectedly Yankee. [3]

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1. Cf. post, pp. 110-124.
2. O.W. Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p. 83.
3. W.S. Kennedy, Oliver W. Holmes, p.239.

To those who would speak slightingly of Holmes for any provincialism he shows because he is so truly representative of New England in many ways, and who would, therefore, deny him the position of representing our nationalism, we would say it is well to turn to Mr. E.C. Stedman,who very clearly states a good reason for this "so-called provincialism".

> A poet must be viewed in the light and shadow of his environment. In the absence of a sunlit atmosphere, they (the poets) shine by inward light, and communicate heat and lustre to their surroundings. 1

He further states that a poet must represent his age and habitat. Applying these facts to Mr. Holmes, we are well aware that he not only represented his locality, but he supplied to that atmosphere, which was not "sunlit", the "heat and lustre" of his personality. Continuing with this train of thought, Mr. Stedman remarks :

> It is natural for the citizen of so vast and various a country as ours to find his patriotism and his gift of expression respond most easily to the appeals of his own locality. Therefore, the poet who wishes to gain distinction as a leader in the national school, should reflect the life about him by representing truly the ideas and emotions of the people of whom he is a part. Instinctively, our early poets,Whittier, Bryant, Lowell, and Holmes, by charging their poems with the feeling of their time and people, gave voice to their own heart. As a consequence, we find their poetry breathing of liberty, patriotism, the charm of the American home-life, and loyalty to the circle of which they are a part. 2

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1. Edmund C. Stedman, Poets of America, p.3.

2. Edmund C. Stedman, Ibid., p.10.

"Loyalty to the circle of which they are a part"[1] is one phase of nationalism which will be seen to be more peculiarly applicable to Holmes than to any other American poet if we pause to consider the wealth of poetry that was written for his classmates of the Class of '29, the American Medical Association, and for the University of which he was such a vital part; as for patriotism, the fire of his verses saved such important historical relics as the Old South Church and Old Ironsides. They were saved for posterity by such ringing words, as :

> Woe to the three-hilled town,
> When through the land the tale is told-
> The brave Old South is down ! [2]
>
> Ay, tear her tattered ensign down !
> Long has it waved on high,
> And many an eye has danced to see
> That banner in the sky. [3]

We find him, time and time again, giving voice to his own heart in response to the conditions of his era, in such poems as, "The Moral Bully", "The Sweet Little Man", and "The Mind's Diet".

His poetry breathes of the liberty so dearly defended by those of whom he speaks in "A Family Record" in such lines as :

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1. Cf. post, pp.93-109.
2. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.237.
3. Ibid., p.4.

One slashed the scalping hell-hounds of Montcalm;
. . . . . .
On many a field he fought in wilds afar;
See on his swarthy cheek the bullet's scar !
There hangs a murderous tomahawk; beneath,
Without its blade, a knife's embroidered sheath;
Save for the stroke his trusty weapon dealt
His scalp had dangled at their owner's belt;
But not for him such fate; he lived to see
The bloodier strife that made our nation free. 1

The charm of American family life gleams in the shining phrases of tenderness that Holmes uses in a tribute to "Lucy", long a familiar figure in Holmes's household, but, who finally left to get married :

What visions of the past return
With Lucy's image blended !
What memories from the silent urn
Of gentle lives long ended !
What dreams of childhood's fleeting morn,
What starry aspirations
That filled the misty days unborn
With fancy's coruscations !

Ah, Lucy, life has swiftly sped
From April to November;
The summer blossoms all are shed
That you and I remember;
But while the vanished years we share
With mingled recollection,
How all their shadowy features wear
The lines of old affections ! 2

Walter Jerrold feels that Miss Mitford, the English critic, was not far wrong in hailing Holmes as one of the first of America's peculiarly national poets; and he himself thinks that Holmes much better represents the peculiar temperament of his countrymen than Longfellow, and that he

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1. O.W. Holmes, Ibid., p.242.
2. Ibid., p.228.

is even more of a national type than Whittier, Lowell, or Whitman because where the others-

> ... represent some particular phase of the national life, character, traditions, or peculiarities, Holmes draws upon all of these, and subtly and yet cocsistently, interweaves in his work any such real difference as may exist between the American nation and the parent race from which it has sprung.
>
> The result is a curious interweaving of shrewd "Poor Richard"like common sense, with high and beautiful thoughts-and the texture of poetry,which, as I take it, is the most peculiarly national that America has yet produced. 1

In "Urania" or "A Rhymed Lesson", we find the "Poor Richard"-like common sense in such aphorisms as the following which are among his most pertinent epigrams :

> So will thy Conscience lost its balanced truth
> If passion's lightning fall upon thy youth.
>
> Still tracks unchanged the everlasting ray
> Where the dark shadows of temptation stray.
>
> The simple lessons that the nursery taught
> Fell soft and stainless on the buds of thought,
> And the full blossom owes its fairest hue
> To those sweet tear-drops of affection's dew.
>
> Full oft the light that led our earlier hours
> Fades with the perfume of our cradle flowers;
>
> Go to thy birthplace, and, if faith were there,
> Repeat thy father's creed, thy mother's prayer !
>
> Deal meekly, gently, with the hopes that guide
> The lowliest brother straying from thy side.
> If right, they bid thee tremble for thine own;
> If wrong, the verdict is for God alone !
>
> Weep for the frail that err, the weak that fall,
> Have thine own faith,-but hope and pray for all !

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1. Walter Jerrold, Oliver Wendell Holmes, p.43.

Yet in opinion look not always back,-
Your wake is nothing, mind the coming track.

And with new notions let me change the rule,-
Don't strike the iron till it's slightly cool.

Track not the steps of such as hold you cheap,
Too mean to prize, though good enough to keep.

Shun such as lounge through afternoons and eves,
And on thy dial write,"Beware of thieves."

Does praise delight thee? Choose some ultra side,
A sure old recipe, and often tried.

Stop not, unthinking, every friend you meet,
To spin your wordy fabric in the street;

Look in his face, to meet thy neighbor's soul,
Not on his garments, to detect a hole.

Words lead to things; a scale is more precise,-
Coarse speech, bad grammar, drinking, vice. 1

To the mind of the writer, Parson's definition of wit seems especially applicable to Holmes,-the "best sense in the world". Many of his couplets are witty proverbs, for he was never happier than when condensing his wise thoughts and prescribing them in the form of such sugar-coated pills. The following will serve as illustrations :

Of all the ill that suffering man endures,
The largest fraction liberal Nature cures;

Nature has placed thee on a changeful tide,
To breast its waves, but not without a guide;

Stick to your aim: the mongrel's hold will slip,
But only crowbars loose the bulldog's grip;

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1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., pp.43-54.

Run, if you like, but try to keep your breath;
Work like a man, but don't be worked to death;

Not all the pumice of the polished town
Can smooth the roughness of the barnyard down.

Speak clearly, if you speak at all;
Carve every word before you let it fall.

And when you stick on conversation's burrs,
Don't strew your pathway with those dreadful urs.

The outward forms the inner man reveal,-
We guess the pulp before we cut the peel ! 1

Some call "Urania" the best specimen of his powers. Its general tone is playful and humorous; but there are passages of great tenderness and pathos; and these neat little packages of wit tied up in heroic couplets not only produce the "inner smile" but are very pithy and quotable. These are phases which make him, through the pure flavor of such mental acuteness, so representative of the Yankee race.

> "Keep you wit in the background", says Holmes, "until you have made a reputation by your more solid qualities. You will do nothing great with Macbeth's dagger, if you first come on flourishing Paul Pry's umbrella."

The constant recurrence of a mirth-provoking humor often allied with high moral truths and touching pathos is highly characteristic of Holmes. In fact, he often uses his poetry to teach truths that have come to him as one of themselves.

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1. Loc. cit.

Since "Wit demands a clear and nimble intellect, presence of mind, and a happy faculty of expression", and since these characteristics have been illustrated by the foregoing examples, we must concede that Mr. Holmes's wit is of a very high order, indeed. The quality of unexpectedness and " a crafty wresting of obvious matter for this purpose", Mr. Holmes has demonstrated in his witty expressions countless times. Most assuredly, he "keeps the word of promise to the ear and breaks it to the sense" without having analogies that are too subtle and too perplexing for the average person to understand; therefore, clearness is another proof of his ability. A copiousness of fancy and imagination, originality, acuteness of observation, and fluency in the range of ideas have been demonstrated in the illustrations given. His markedly incongruous ideas used in comparison, such as the following,give the reader a double sense of surprise and pleasure :

> We snatch the cup and lift to drain it dry,-
> Its central dimple holds a drowning fly!
>
> Thus great Achilles,who had shown his zeal
> In healing wounds, died of a wounded heel.
>
> Be like the granite of thy rock-ribbed land,-
> As slow to rear,as obdurate to stand.

"Wit that includes fancy flying off into extravagance with nice compactness of expression" is another method of defining the wit of Holmes.

"The highest comic range of comic verse is found in humorous poems not dependent on parody or pun or mere verbal eccentricities, but humorous in themselves," declares one authority.[1] It was this type of comic verse that Holmes began to write when he was a young man, and these early poems show the fun-loving side of his genius. As one writer expresses it, "The true humorist must be an optimist," and the geniality of Mr. Holmes was a characteristic of him no less as a writer than as a man. Mr. George Cooke declares that in this field :

> Holmes rises to a higher level of the absurd than did Hood...Some of his poems like "The Height of the Ridiculous" and "The Music Grinders" have no other purpose than that of laughter...In the laughter of Dr. Holmes there is a pure enjoyment of life, and a desire to lead men out of their follies.[2]

In reading many of these "purely humorous ebullitions of playful fancy" it seems difficult for anyone to realize that they are written by the poet who could at times "touch the lyre with such very different effects." It is interesting to notice that during the first years of his poethood, Holmes wrote some of the most wildly humorous and at the same time some of the most obviously serious of his works.[3] It is characteristic of youth, anyway, to be both wildly playful at times and then again deadly serious; and poems such as "The Height of the Ridiculous" and "The Last Leaf" are the incongruous outcroppings of this youthful period.

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1. Stephen Leacock, Humor, Its Theory and Technique, p.146.
2. G.W. Cooke,"Oliver Wendell Holmes", New England Magazine, (October, 1889), p.117.
3. Walter Jerrold, Op. cit., p.55.

As a humorist, the poet of "The Last Leaf" was among the first to teach his countrymen that pathos is an equal part of humor; that sorrow is lightened by jest, and jest redeemed by emotion, under most conditions of this life.

The things which he turned off with purely comic aim were always neatly finished, and the merriment in them did quite as much for him, who,"dared not be as funny as he could" as his poems of a higher class.

With his poems of humor pure and simple, of extravagance and fun, Oliver W. Holmes cheered and comforted many,lightened care, and diverted the sorrowing. His was "the ministry of humor". He was truly a poet of this life, and his humor was particularly fresh in his age. Even some of his last poems bear testimony to the fact that his humor was an endowment "that age could not stale or wither". "The Broomstick Train", written when he was eighty-one, gives evidence of this long-enduring sense of humor:

> "Yes, where are our cats?" the witches bawled,
> And began to call them by name;
> As fast as they called the cats,they came :
> There was bob-tailed Tommy and long-tailed Tim,
> And wall-eyed Jacky and green-eyes Jim,
> And splay-foot Benny and slim-legged Beau,
> And Skinny and Squally, and Jerry and Joe. 1

One noted authority states :

> Holmes is not like Byron, who dazzles us, or Swift, who domineers over us, or Sterne, who trifles with us, nor is he a mere wag,like some of the later

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1. O.W. Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.303.

> American humorists,but he is one to rest in, to travel with. We love to have him close to us, our welcome guide, philosopher, and friend... His very humor is deeply interwoven with deep seriousness. 1

Well, who else but our witty poet could display, at one and the same time, cynicism that is genial and good-natured in spirit, done up in such humorous couplets as the following lines regarding matrimony ?

> Quoth Tom,"Though fair her features be,
> It is her figure pleases me !"
> "What may her figure be ?" I cried.
> "One hundred thousand," he replied.

The numerous poems of Dr. Holmes can be divided into two classes, as to form,- lyrics and poetic essays in solid couplet-verse; as to purpose, into the lighter songs that may be sung, and the nobler members, part lyrical, part the poems, both gay and sober, delivered at frequent intervals during his long career.[2] "He is a song writer of the natural kind through his taste for the open vowel-sounds, and for measures that set themselves to tune." Some of his ballads are superior to his songs. One particularly good ballad, racy and indicative of good-fellowship,an outstanding trait of Holmes, is the poem that gives us a humorous picture of Miles Standish busily stirring with his sword while-

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1. H.R. Haweis, American Humorists, p.46.
2. E.C. Stedman, Poets of America, p. 282.

He poured the fiery Hollands in,-the man that
never feared,-
He took a long and solemn draught, and wiped his
yellow beard;
And one by one the musketeers-the men that
fought and prayed-
All drank as 'twere their mother's milk,and
not a man afraid. 1

Even with some of the essentially pathetic pieces, there is yet an atmosphere of humor through which they are seen, and by which they are colored in some degree.

In speaking of the pathos that we find so frequently in Holmes's poems of his mature years and sometimes in his youthful poems, one critic affirms that :

> It is his pathos that makes the richness of the humor,a pathos that is deep and sympathetic. If he laughs at what is amusing in the deeds and characters of men, he can weep with them,too; and by his weeping he shows that he is fully alive to their distresses and their sorrows. It is only a moment's touch from laughter to tears, and he has the gift of passing quickly from one to the other. He has truly recognized the fact that pathos lies deeper than humor, and that humor must have its basis in the pathetic when it is most serviceable and most human. 2

The commingling of pathos and humor in "The Last Leaf" very well exemplifies this theory, advanced by the foregoing critic, and makes of it that little gem of a masterpiece recognized by all.

"We laugh over his wit and humor", says Whittier, "until, to use his own words,

'We suspect the azure blossom that unfolds
upon a shoot,
As if wisdom's old potato could not flourish
- - - - - - - - - - - - - at its root'. - - - - - - - - - - -

1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.30
2. G.W. Cooke, Op. cit., pp.117-118.

And perhaps the next page melts us into tears by a pathos only equalled by that of Sterne's sick lieutenant. He is Montaigne and Bacon under one hat. His very qualities would suffice for the mental furnishing of half a dozen literary specialists. To those who have enjoyed the privilege of his intimate acquaintance, the man himself is more than the author. His genial nature, entire freedom from jealousy or envy, quick tenderness, large charity, hatred of sham, pretense, and unreality, and his reverent sense of the eternal and permanent have secured for him something more and dearer than literary renown,-the love of all who know him. I might say more:I could not say less. May his life be long in the land! 1

Another authority declares that :

One of the most striking features of Holmes's writings-both prose and poetry- is the evidence of the remarkable power which he has of seizing upon happy similes; a page is often rich with a wealth of imagery that would serve a "minor" writer for a volume. That Holmes is a true poet is a matter about which there cannot be any doubt, despite the fact that many persons would add, "Yes, a true humorous poet"-implying in their use of the word humorous a something derogatory to the man's genius as a poet. Yes,he is a humorous poet; and in the peculiar sense of being a true poet and a great humorist combined we can only find his equal in Thomas Hood. Although both as poets and humorists they are quite unlike, still in the peculiar combination of the two functions they are the same. They are not poets, without the saving quality of humor; they are not versifying humorists...who are humorists merely using the poetic vehicle stripped of all that makes it poetry. 2

John G. Whittier does not feel that Holmes should be likened to Hood. He feels that there is little in common between them save the power of combining fancy and sentiment with grotesque drollery and humor.

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1. John G. Whittier, Personal Sketches, p.308.

2. Walter Jerrold, Op. cit., p.47.

He claims that :

> Hood, under all his whims and oddities, conceals the vehement intensity of a reformer. The iron of the world's wrongs had entered into his soul; there is an undertone of sorrow in his lyrics; his sarcasm, directed against oppression and bigotry at times betrays the earnestness of one "whose own withers have been wrung". Holmes writes simply for the amusement of himself and his readers; he deals only with the vanity, the foibles, and the minor faults of mankind, good-naturedly and almost sympathizingly, suggesting excuses for the folly which he tosses about on the "horns of the ridiculous". [1]

That Mr. Holmes does " deal good-naturedly with the minor faults of mankind" may be true; but if hypocrisy and lack of loyalty were included(and we must include them because Mr. Holmes deals with them), then we can agree neither with Mr. Whittier's category of faults, dealt with " good-naturedly and almost sympathetically", as conclusive, nor can we agree with the statement that Holmes always writes simply for amusement purposes, and not for any purpose of reform. It will be part of the work of this thesis to discuss Holmes's satires which very clearly have for their purpose definite reforms.[2]

As Holmes speaks of some of his poems, he includes:

> Rhymes that, flitting through the brain,
> Beat against my window-pane,
> Some with gayly-colored wings,
> Some, alas! with venomed stings!
>
> Here are angry lines,"too hard".
> Says the soldier, battle-scarred.

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1. John G.Whittier,"Oliver Wendell Holmes",Prose Works, Vol. III, p.381.
2. Cf. post, pp. 110-123.

Could I smile his scar away
I would blot the bitter lay,

Written with a knitted brow,
Read with placid wonder now,
Throbbed such passion in my heart ?
Did his wounds once really smart ? 1

If we will concede that a "wealth of imagery" is one of the characteristics of a true poet, it will be easy to substantiate this point as far as Mr. Holmes is concerned, for it will be found that his employment of "happy similes" is far in excess of the average poet. Let us take a few examples chosen at random from among the pages of his poetical works :

Not all the dye-stuffs from the vats of truth
Can match the rainbow on the robes of youth. 2

When spring is but a spendthrift's dream,
And summer's wealth a wasted dower,
Nor dews nor sunshine may redeem,-
Then autumn coins his Golden Flower. 3

Well, Time with his snuffers is prowling about,
And his shaky old finger will soon snuff us out;
There's a hint for us all in each pendulum tick,
For we're low in the tallow and long in the wick. 4

Yon whey-faced brother, who delights to wear
A weedy flux of ill-conditioned hair;
. . . . . .
While Peter, glistening with luxurious scorn
Husks his white ivories like an ear of corn. 5

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1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.185.
2. Ibid., p.283.
3. Ibid., p.290.
4. Ibid., p.132.
5. Ibid., p. 84.

> A laugh is priming to the loaded soul;
> The scattering shots become a steady roll,
> Broke by sharp cracks that run along the line,
> The light artillery of the talker's wine. 1

It will be seen at once by these examples how readily the poet lays hold of similes quite apposite, yet, entirely "unhackneyed and unspoiled by endless repetition; they come upon us, as we read, with all the pleasure of that surprise which is said to lie at the root of our delight in wit". 2

Not only are we delighted with their freshness and originality, but we are impressed by the wide fields of knowledge from which they are drawn. As one critic presents it :

> His figures of speech are drawn from every imaginable source, chemical, anatomical, commercial, social, natural, pugilistical, nautical,"reportorial", historical, and physiological. 3

The fields of his fancy are so fertile that ideas came rushing from him in such a steady stream that he appears "to flow with that facility" that Jonson ascribed to Shakespeare's "brave notions" and "gentle expressions" that flowed so copiously from him that he had to be stopped.

The following figures of speech will illustrate this facility of drawing striking figures from diverse sources, and his ingenuity in expressing them in characteristically original phrases :

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1. Ibid., p.309.
2. Walter Jerrold, op. cit., p.58.
3. S.I. Hayakawa and H.M. Jones, Oliver Wendell Holmes,p.ciii

Characteristically Original Phrases

(from "Urania")

1. coinage of conceit
2. ocean-salted Charles
3. dandelion's feathery mantled globe
4. plebian grasses of the reeking marsh
5. astringent smile
6. pin-head eyes
7. poor seabird's tattered wings
8. half-choked welcome
9. hooded, mitred,or tiaraed clay
10. from sparkling midnight to refulgent noon
11. living current of devotion
12. poems that shuffle with superfluous legs
13. creeping avarice with open hand
14. dying sunset sheds his crimson stains
15. faint halos of the irised panes
16. the undevout rattan half profanely twirled
17. saddened features of the promised smile
18. his eye omnivorous must devour them all
19. sound's sweet effluence polarize thy brain
20. glance of thy prismatic eye

On his seventy-fifth birthday, in 1884, Lowell inscribed "To Holmes" some verses which may well serve for a final characterization of the poet and the man, Oliver Wendell Holmes :

Dear Wendell, why need I count the years
Since first your genius made me thrill,
If what moved then to smiles or tears,
Or both contending, move me still ?

What has the Calendar to do
With poets ? What Time's fruitless tooth
With gay immortals such as you
Whose years but emphasize your youth ?
. . . . . .

Master alike in speech and song
Of fame's great antiseptic- Style,
You with the classic few belong
Who tempered wisdom with a smile.

Outlive us all ! Who else like you
Could sift the seedcorn from our chaff,

And make us with the pen we knew
Deathless at least in epitaph ? 1

At the breakfast given in honor of Dr. Holmes's seventieth birthday by the publishers of "The Atlantic Monthly", in 1879, he read his poem, "The Iron Gate", which so well represents the mixture of humor and pathos, with the latter predominating in his closing years. Some of the stanzas to illustrate this spirit are given here :

Old age, the graybeard ! Well,indeed, I know him,-
Shrunk,tottering bent, of aches and ills the prey;
In sermon,story,fable,picture,poem,
Oft have I met him from my earliest day:
. . . . . .
Yes,long,indeed,I've known him at a distance,
And now my lifted door-latch shows him here;
I take his shriveled hand without resistance,
And find him smiling as his step draws near.

What though of gilded baubles he bereaves us,
Dear to the heart of youth, to manhood's prime;
Think of the calm he brings, the wealth he leaves us,
The hoarded spoils,the legacies of time.

Altars once flaming,still with incense fragrant,
Passion's uneasy nurslings rocked asleep,
Hope's anchor faster, wild desire less vagrant,
Life's flow less noisy,but the stream how deep !
. . . . . .
Youth longs and manhood strives,but age remembers,
Sits by the raked-up ashes of the past,
Spreads its thin hands above the whitening embers
That warm the creeping life-blood till the last.
. . . . . .
I come not here your morning hour to sadden
A limping pilgrim,leaning on his staff,-
I,who have never deemed it sin to gladden
This vale of sorrows with a wholesome laugh.
. . . . . .

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1. James Russell Lowell, Complete Poetical Works, p.381

Time claims his tribute, silence now is golden;
Let me not vex the too-long-suffering lyre;
Though to your love untiring still beholden,
The curfew tells me - - cover up the fire.

And now with greatful smile and accents cheerful,
And warmer heart than look or word can tell,
In simplest phrase-these traitorous eyes are tearful-
Thanks, Brothers,Sisters,Children,-and farewell ! 1

In summarizing this chapter the following facts appear evident: (1) humorous poetry should not be considered as an inferior class of poetry simply because it is humorous; (2) it is necessary to cultivate the sense of the genuinely humorous; (3) it would be well to study the humorous poetry of Holmes, since his poetry is genuine in spirit, due to the fact that humor was diffused throughout the whole nature of the man; (4) Holmes's gifts of wit and humor were never used for ulterior purposes; (5) they are allied with high moral truths and touching pathos; (6) he cheered and comforted many with his humorous and witty verses; (7) he has a remarkable power of seizing upon happy similes far in excess of the average poet; (8) his poetry contains a wealth of imagery; (9) his witty couplets are characterized by "the best sense in the world"; (10) originality, acuteness of observation, copiousness of fancy, fluency in the range of ideas,the quality of unexpectedness, clearness, surprising incongruities, geniality, and the facility of drawing striking

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1. Oliver W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.243.

figures from diverse sources are some of his distinguishing traits; (11) his humor and wit represent a distinct phase of our nationalism.

CHAPTER V

TYPES OF POETRY

INTRODUCTION

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

His still the keen analysis
    Of men and moods, electric wit,
Free play of mirth, and tenderness
    To heal the slightest wound from it.

And his the pathos touching all
    Life's sins and sorrows and regrets,
Its hopes and fears, its final call
    And rest beneath the violets.

His sparkling surface scarce betrays
    The thoughtful tide beneath it rolled-
The wisdom of the latter days,
    And tender memories of the old.

Stanzas by John G. Whittier, "The Autocrat".

Who learned what in no school is taught-
    The secret of men's tears and laughter.

- R. W. Gilder.

The best that we can sing or say
    Is but the echo of his verses.

- Bret Harte.

FAMILIAR VERSE

INTRODUCTION

Nay, blame me not; I might have spared
    Your patience many a trivial verse;
Yet these my earlier welcome shared,
    So let the better shield the worse.

Friends of the Muse, to you of right belong
The first staid footsteps of my square-toed
song;
Full well I know the strong heroic line
Has lost its fashion since I made it mine;
But these are tricks old singers will not learn
And this grave measure still must serve my
turn.

Go pictured rhymes, for loving readers
meant;
Bring back the smiles your jocund
morning lent,
And warm their hearts with
sunbeams yet unspent !

- Oliver Wendell Homes.

CHAPTER V

FAMILIAR VERSE

Something has already been said concerning Holmes's humorous poems written solely for pure fun and amusement; it is now the purpose of this chapter to discuss the other main types of humorous and witty verse, namely, familiar verse, vers d'occasion, and satire.

According to the consensus of critical opinion, Oliver Wendell Holmes is the best familiar verse writer in classic American letters, and the first American to devote himself to any great extent to this type of art. "His only predecessor in this is Irving, who, however, produced only a little," comments one authority, "and that at rare intervals." He goes on to say :

> His successors, on the other hand, have maintained a strong tradition of familiar verse in America- so strong, indeed, that it seems almost to be the only American literary tradition that has a reasonable continuity, unaffected by fads and movements and social convulsions, to the present day. Of this tradition Holmes is the leader. 1

It is a fact that has been acknowledged by William Cowper and many since his time that the familiar style is of all styles the most difficult to succeed in, because of the necessity of using the language of prose without sacrificing the beauty of what constitutes the poetic diction.

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1. S.I.Hayakawa, and Howard M.Jones, Oliver Wendell Holmes, pp. i-lxxxvii.

This language must be used elegantly and harmoniously to represent moods that may be instructive or entertaining, while subjects of the most important as well as the most trivial character, may be treated with equal success.

One noted authority claims this type of verse should be short, graceful, refined, and fanciful, not seldom distinguished by chastened sentiment, and often playful. Furthermore, he states :

> The tone should not be pitched high; it should be terse and idiomatic,and rather in the conversational key...The entire poem should be marked by tasteful moderation,high finish, and completeness; for,however trivial the subject matter may be, indeed, rather in proportion to its triviality, subordination to the rules of composition, and perfection by execution, are of the utmost importance...The writer...must not only be something of a poet, but he must also be a man of the world,in the liberal sense of the expression; he must have associated throughout his life with the refined and cultivated members of his species, not merely as an idle bystander, but as a busy actor in the throng. 1

Holmes, as the chief member of the Brahmin caste, as the literary arbiter of New England, the University poet of Harvard and a member of the Saturday Club, was fully qualified by these distinctions to become a writer of familiar verse according to this critic's theory. At an early age, in fact, when he was twenty-one, we find him beginning to write some of his familiar verse,lighter in quality than that which followed later, and characterized by the fun-loving spirit so inherent in the man himself.

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1. Frederick Locker-Lampson, Lyra Elegantorum,cited by S.I. Hayakawa and H.M.Jones, Op.cit., p.lxxviii.

Some of the best-known of these are "The Height of the Ridiculous", "The Dorchester Giant", "The Spectre Pig", "Reflections of a Proud Pedestrian", "Evenings by a Tailor", and "Ballad of the Oysterman". They all show care in versification and exactness of rhyme, but do not shine with the brilliance characteristic of his later familiar verse; but in judging them, we should keep in mind what Holmes himself said,"A chick, before his shell is off his back, is hardly a fair subject for severe criticism".[1] In regard to "The Spectre Pig",he remarked that it was a wicked suggestion which came into his head after reading Dana's "Buccaneer", but he was sure that the venerable poet would not have been pleased had he known it was a parody. In judging these verses we should keep in mind the more important fact that they were written solely for the purpose of fun and very effectually achieved their aim. "The Spectre Pig", which is written as a ballad, begins with the lines :

> It was the stalwart butcher man,
> That knit his swarthy brow,
> And said the gentle Pig must die,
> And sealed it with a vow. [2]

A surprise comes in the ending where the butcher man is hanging where the little Pig was supposed to be. Children are very fond of this story and for them, there is a special charm in the rhythm and words, such as :

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1. O.W.Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.321.
2. Loc. cit.

Back flew the bolt, up rose the latch,
And open swung the door,
And little mincing feet were heard
Pat,pat along the floor.

In the poem, "Reflections of a Proud Pedestrian",we have a galloping rhythm to represent the horse and rattling gig and two very incongruous pictures made by the dashing driver and the mud-bespattered pedestrian:

(First stanza)

I saw the curl of his waving lash,
And the glance of his knowing eye,
And I knew that he thought he was cutting a dash,
As his steed went thundering by.

(Last stanza)

And hurry away on your lonely ride,
Nor deign from the mire to save me;
I will paddle it stoutly at your side
With the tandem that nature gave me ! 1

In "The Height of the Ridiculous" we have excellent evidence of Holmes's sense of the comic, and his early appreciation of the fact that he could write funny things:

Ten days and nights,with sleepless eye,
I watched that wretched man,
And since, I never dare to write
As funny as I can. 2

In 1831, when he was only twenty-two, he wrote outstanding examples of familiar verse: "To an Insect", "My Aunt", and that masterpiece,"The Last Leaf",which shows that Holmes's laughter had mellowed to a smile and with the smile, the tears are mingled. "To an Insect", or his Katydid poem,

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1. Op. cit., p.8.
2. Ibid., p.14.

is charming. The tone is gay and bantering(until we reach the last stanza), and is an excellent example of a trifling subject dealt with skilfully :

> Peace to the ever-murmuring race !
> And when the latest one
> Shall fold in death her feeble wings
> Behind the autumn sun,
> Then shall she raise her fainting voice
> And lift her drooping lid,
> And then the child of future years
> Shall hear what Katy did. 1

"My Aunt", of whom Holmes speaks as the "one sad, ungathered rose on my ancestral tree", is a perfect poem of its kind. The skilful manner in which he describes the homely details concerning his aunt's desired accomplishments, and the mocking manner that he employs throughout,make it a very delightful poem,indeed:

> They braced my aunt against a board
> To make her straight and tall;
> They laced her up, they starved her down,
> To make her light and small;
> They pinched her feet,they singed her hair,
> They screwed it up with pins;-
> Oh,never mortal suffered more
> In penance for her sins. 2

Her father had been intent on making her "the finest girl within a hundred miles", but no one "tore from the trembling father's arms his all-accomplished maid". A hint of gentle irony is beginning to creep into his poems, and this, together with his delicate touches of sympathy, makes this familiar verse appealing to all.

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1. Ibid., p.7.
2. Ibid., p.8.

Among his later efforts at this type of poetry, "Contentment", in which he says he embodies "the subdued and limited desires of maturity",belongs in the first rank, according to critical opinion. As one writer states it:

> This sort of paradoxical play upon ideas, always half serious (or at least a trifle more serious than the reader suspects at first glance) is a favorite form of wit with Holmes. 1

"Should you like to hear what moderate wishes life brings one to at last?" Holmes asks in the introduction to this poem, and answers the question by stating,in part:

> Little I ask; my wants are few;
> I only wish a hut of stone,
> (A very plain brownstone will do,)
> That I may call my own;-
> And close at hand is such a one,
> In yonder street that fronts the sun.
>
> Of pictures, I should like to own
> Titians and Raphaels three or four,-
> I love so much their style and tone,
> One Turner, and no more,
> (A landscape,-foreground golden dirt,-
> The sunshine painted with a squirt.) 2

There is a "delicious" sense of humor apparent throughout the poem, the thoughts are gracefully phrased, and the imagery, as is usual with Holmes, is of a fresh and original, but striking type-"vellum rich as country cream", "golden dirt", "like wrinkled skins of scalded milk", and "ape the glittering upstart fool" are particularly felicitous in their application. This poem was published when Holmes was

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1. S. I. Hayakawa, and H.M. Jones, Op. Cit., p.lxxxiv.
2. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.157.

forty-nine; in the same year, he wrote that masterpiece, "The One-Hoss Shay", the poem that will always maintain its position in the highest rank of humorous familiar verse because of its incomparable wit, high-grade humor, and the sparkling manner of its execution. Both "Contentment" and "The Deacon's Masterpiece" showing the flowering maturity of his humorous and poetical genius.

This period of his life is so full of the good things which are an outcrop of these two phases of his genius, that it is somewhat difficult to make a choice for the purpose of illustration. "The Last Blossom", another good specimen, represents that delicate commingling of amusement and pathos that had become so characteristic of Holmes in his maturity:

> Might we but share one wild caress
> Ere life's autumnal blossoms fall,
> And Earth's brown, clinging lips impress
> The long cold kiss that waits for all! 1

One of the wonderful facts about Holmes's genius is that it should continue to flower long after the period when the average poet has gone to seed; and that even in his old age, his poetry should sustain that marvellous quality of humor for which he is distinguished. Passing over to the period of his life which is well after the Civil War, we find his famous conversational poem, "Dorothy Q.", addressed to a childhood portrait of his great-grandmother. It shows all the mastery of his touch and the refined quality of his

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1. O.W.Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.156.

delicate sentiments expressed in the homely language of ordinary conversation. As Holmes himself declared,"I cannot tell the story of Dorothy Q. more simply in prose than I have told it in verse, but I can add something to it". And that is one of the secrets of his success-the choice of a proper medium- the homely language of ordinary conversation-and his masterly control over that modest medium so beautifully expressed in the following lines:

> What if a hundred years ago
> Those close-shut lips had answered No,
> When forth the tremulous question came
> That cost the maiden her Norman name,
> And under the folds that look so still
> The bodice swelled with the bosom's thrill?
> Should I be I, or would it be
> One tenth another, to nine tenths me? 1

In the following year, after writing "Dorothy Q.", he published "Aunt Tabitha", a poem in which a young girl makes a complaint because her spinster aunt is far too rigid in discipline; the first and last stanzas given here will serve to demonstrate the genial humor and delightful tone of the poem:

> Whatever I do,and whatever I say,
> Aunt Tabitha tells me that isn't the way;
> When she was a girl (forty summers ago)
> Aunt Tabitha tells me they never did so.
> . . . . . .
> A martyr will save us, and nothing else can;
> Let me perish-to rescue some wretched young man !
> Though when to the altar a victim I go,
> Aunt Tabitha'll tell me she never did so ! 2

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1. Ibid., p.187.

2. Ibid., p.171.

His imagination, fancy, and a mixture of wistfulness and amusement are keenly felt in the charming "Epilogue to the Breakfast Table Series". He imagines himself passing a book-stall in the year A.D. 1972, where his works are on the ten-cent bargain shelf, and he hears the comments made by a passer-by who has happened to see his now-forgotten Breakfast-Table books lying there. The tone of wistfulness denotes the doubts in him as to whether(since he had played so often the part of Yorick instead of the part of Hamlet which he had so longed to play) the popularity he had gained as a writer would survive his generation. Dear, wistful poet of "the cap and bells", your poetry will survive, for to it you gave not only the playfulness of a Yorick and the wit of a Mercutio, but the sweetness and philosophy of Shakespeare himself !

Here are two stanzas, the one comical because of the spirit riant in the man, the other, touched with the tenderness of his humanism:

> Ho ! dealer; for the motto's sake
> This scarecrow from the shelf I take;
> Three starveling volumes bound in one,
> Its covers warping in the sun.
> Methinks it hath a musty smell,
> I like its flavor none too well,
> But Yorick's brain was far from dull,
> Though Hamlet pah ! 'd and dropped his skull.
> . . . . . .

And was he noted in his day ?
Read, flattered, honored ? Who shall say ?
Poor wreck of time, the wave has cast
To find a peaceful shore at last,
Once glorying in thy gilded name
And freighted deep with hopes of fame,
Thy leaf is moistened with a tear,
The first for many a long, long year. 1

It speaks well for the author that in dealing with sentiment, he is sufficiently artistic to escape sentimentality; and also, that in expressing pure sentiment, he is able to conform to the classical correctness of Horace-there are no "purple patches", and even Jonson, exponent of the classical traditions and portrayer of the "humors", would not have wished that he had "blotted a line".

"The Organ-Blower", which was published the same year as "The Epilogue", runs the gamut of humor all the way from the fun-loving treble of youth to the deeper strain of philosophic maturity. The first and eighth stanzas are quoted here:

(First stanza)

Devoutest of my Sunday friends,
The patient Organ-blower bends;
I see his figure sink and rise
(Forgive me,Heaven, my wandering eyes !)
A moment lost,the next half seen,
His head above the scanty screen,
Still measuring out his deep salaams
Through quavering hymns and panting
psalms.

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1. Ibid., p.184.

(Last stanza)

This many-diapasoned maze,
Through which the breath of living strays,
Whose music makes our earth divine,
Has work for mortal hands like mine.
My duty lies before me. Lo,
The lever there ! Take hold and blow !
And He whose hand is on the keys
Will play the tune as He shall please. 1

Who but a Holmes would think of calling our life here "this many-diapasoned maze"? There are many other such descriptive phrases indicative of his wealth of imagery- "mortgaged soul", "leathery creak", "panting psalms", and "slumbering echoes"- associated with his experiences in church. It is phrases such as these that are ample proof of the craftsmanship of this wizard of word-play.

In "The Archbishop and Gil Blas", "Shadows", "In the Twilight", and others published between the ages of seventy and seventy-three, we find "no traces of age", and in his humor "no flavor of mild decay"; so as a parody of Holmes's famous lines,let us say :

There couldn't be,-for his Wit and Art
Had made it so perfect in every part
That there wasn't a chance for one to start.

These three poems of his later years are on old age, and in them, we see again a spirit of playfulness, of pathos, of "comic ruefulness",- an expression of the poet's same old delight in mingling sincerity and profundity of feeling; yet, as usual, effulgent with his sparkling wit.

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1. Ibid., p.187.

Witness these lines from "A Loving Cup Song" written during this same period, and touching again upon old age:

> Old Time his rusty scythe may whet
> The unmowed grass is growing yet,
> Beneath the sheltering snow, my boys;
> And if the crazy dotard ask,
> Is love worn out ? Is life a task ?
> We'll bravely answer No ! my boys,
> We'll bravely answer No ! 1

One is amazed at the long period of productivity of Holmes in this field, for there was no abating of his talents during the period beginning with "The Last Leaf" and extending to "The Broomstick Train", a period of almost sixty years during which his familiar verse maintained its high standard of perfection. "The Broomstick Train" represents one of his most humorous poems, an excerpt from which has been given in a previous chapter. 2

One wonders how anyone so old could still breathe the spirit of youth into his poem, write it with apparent ease and his usual correctness, and also be so prolific in imagery, some of which is outstanding; as, "sweet with the bayberry's chaste perfume" and "dark,dim, Dante-like solitudes". Passages particularly humorous refer to the fact that "the witches had knocked about in the world below",

> When an Essex Deacon dropped in to call,
> And a homesick feeling seized them all;

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1. Ibid., p.145.

2. Supra, Chapter IV, p.68.

and again where the witches ask leave of their master to visit the upper regions, and he consented because :

> ...he happened to be in a pleasant mood,
> As fiends with their skins full sometimes are,- [1]
> (He'd been drinking with "roughs" at a Boston bar.)

Holmes aims a shaft of satire, moreover, at Essex County because of the days of the witchcraft delusion associated with it:

> In Essex County there's many a roof
> Well known to him of the cloven hoof;
> The small square windows are full in view
> Which the midnight hags went sailing through. [2]

Any one who is a lover of familiar verse and compares Holmes's work with any other writers of familiar verse such as, - Bret Harte, Eugene Field, R.H. Stoddard, and many of our present modern race of newspaper and magazine wits, will find that Holmes like his "old horse that won the bet" has "distanced all the lot".

In summarizing the facts concerning familiar verse it becomes evident that: (1) Holmes is the best familiar verse writer in classic American letters; (2) he was the first American to devote himself to any great extent to this art; (3) his successors have maintained a strong tradition of familiar verse in America; (4) the familiar style is difficult to succeed in; (5) Holmes was especially fitted to succeed because of being a refined, cultivated

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1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.302.

2. Loc. cit.

man of the world; (6) he began this type of writing at an early age; (7) his first familiar verse was written for pure fun and enjoyment; (8) his later familiar verses are distinguished by the flowering maturity of his humorous and poetical genius; (9) this ability of his flourished long after the average poet had gone to seed; (10) his familiar verses are always meticulously written; (11) characteristic traits of this verse are sparkling wit, sincerity and profundity of feeling, playfulness, comic ruefulness, and wealth of imagery.

OCCASIONAL VERSE

INTRODUCTION

Not for glory, not for pelf,
    Not, be sure, to please myself,
Not for any meaner ends,-
    Always "by request of friends".

Here's the cousin of a king,-
    Would I do the civil thing ?
Here's the first-born of a queen;
    Here's a slant-eyed Mandarin.

. . . . . .
Would I just this once comply ?-
    So they teased and teased me till I
(Be the truth at once confessed)
    Wavered- yielded- did my best.

Turn my pages,-never mind
    If you like not all you find;
Think not all the grains are gold
    Sacramento's sand-banks hold.

Every kernel has its shell
    Every chime its harshest bell
Every face its weariest look,
    Every shelf its emptiest book.

Every field its leanest sheaf,
    Every book its dullest leaf,
Every leaf its weakest line,-
    Shall it not be so with mine ?

Best for worst shall make amends,
    Find us, keep us, leave us friends
Till, perchance, we meet again.
    Benedicite.- Amen !

Oliver Wendell Holmes.

There's Holmes, who is matchless among you for wit;
A Leyden-jar always full-charged from which flit
The electrical tingles of hit after hit.
He has perfect sway of what I call a plain meter,
But many admire it, the English pentameter,
And Campbell, I think, wrote most commonly worse,
With less nerve, swing, and fire in the same kind
of verse.
. . . . . .

INTRODUCTION

His are just the fine hands, too, to weave you a lyric
Full of fancy, fun, feeling, or spiced with satiric
In a measure so kindly, you doubt if the toes
That are trodden upon are your own or your foes' !

James Russell Lowell, "A Fable for Critics".

CHAPTER V

OCCASIONAL VERSE

The genial Holmes, the Brahmin Wit,and literary arbiter of New England, was especially qualified as a writer of vers d'occasion.

> "Iknow nothing in English or any other literature",declared Holmes,"more admirable than that sentiment of Sir Thomas Browne, 'Every man truly lives, so long as he acts his nature, or some way makes good the faculties of himself'."

Oliver Wendell Holmes truly lives today, and will continue to live because that geniality of temperament and sense of humor innate in the man himself, together with his keenness of intellect, are the faculties which helped him to make good; acting his nature, now as Yorick, again as Mercutio,and above all as the laughing philosopher, he not only holds an enviable position among his contemporaries in the field of wit and humor, but also since his day, his superiority in these fields of literature must necessarily be considered indisputable.

A noted critic pays a tribute to Holmes, in the passage that follows, that does much in summarizing briefly the characteristic contributions made to our literature by our Poet :

> Holmes believed in his age and celebrated it, or, occasionally mocked it in light rhyme. . . It was as a laughing philosopher that he made . . . and still makes . . . his final impression.
>
> He mingles the town-bred glitter of an earlier epoch with an outdoor Yankee quickness and

> a Latin incisiveness. We hearken to what seems to be an unfamiliar Addison, and find we are listening to a New England Horace. 1

To this it would be well to add the tribute paid our Laughing Philosopher by the author of "The Poet among the Hills", for here we see Holmes's poetry in another light, away from"the town-bred glitter," and with more of his Yankee traits apparent. The writer says in part :

> It is nature herself that breathes through each and every line. While reading them we feel that what we enjoy was as much an "elixir of delight" for him when he received it from her as it is for us when we receive it from him. We need no analysis to assure us that it is the free, uncontaminated outflow from a full and pure fountain, and not an indifferent stream from a force-pump. . . .
>
> The poet must express his utmost qualities in his verse; and the noblest poetry in all its varied but harmonious elements is the visible soul of the noblest man. 2

Holmes had those utmost qualities of the noblest man- an exquisitely sympathetic nature, courtesy, truthfulness,and kindliness- and his greatest poetry gives remarkable evidence of this nobility.

In the field of occasional poems, or vers d'occasion, those familiar with the scenes amid which, and the themes upon which Holmes wrote will recognize meanings and receive impressions hidden from readers not thus favored. In our judgment of this particular type of verse it is necessary to

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1. Louis Untermeyer,"From the Beginning to Whitman", American Poetry, first edition, p.44
2. J.E.A.Smith, Poet Among the Hills, p.12.

take into consideration, moreover, the difficulties under which the poet labored; for the limitations set upon the author by these special conditions, which govern his art, are far-reaching in their effects. To begin with, this kind of poetry is not written for the sake of what the poet has to say at a given occasion, but in order for him to express public sentiments at a public occasion; therefore, this verse is not supposed to express the individual emotion of the poet alone,but the general emotions of the people that he addresses. The poet,then, becomes the instrument of the group.

As one critic remarks:

> The public occasional poet . . . . . has no right to alter the character of public sentiments to suit his own ideas. . . The poet, obviously, is compelled to make no startling innovations in thought or in technique. Even as he shares the community's sentiments, he must share the community's ideas as to what constitutes the "correct" way of expressing these sentiments. . . . The chief trouble with having one's reputation rest upon public occasional verse is that the poem is bound to die with the event. 1

The writer then advises any reader who wishes to enjoy the reading of occasional verse to try to put himself into the frame of mind that the occasion for the poem demands by using the following methods:

> He may attempt to recall the physical setting in which the poem was first declaimed, read, or distributed. . . he must share imaginatively the sentiments of the public whose feelings were being expressed.It follows that he must be prepared to accept

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1. S.I.Hayakawa and H.M.Jones, Oliver Wendell Holmes, p.lxxxix .

> sentiments (even sentimentalities) which he may not be accustomed to regarding as poetic. 1

To Oliver Wendell Holmes it has been granted,without question, the position of being the greatest writer of society verses in America-some going so far as to say- the best occasional verse writer in the English-speaking world.

In regard to this phase of Holmes's poetry, one authority states :

> The Dean among our writers of poems for occasions is unquestionably Dr. Holmes, by virtue of his apt response to the instant call, and of the wit, wisdom,conviction, and the scholarly polish that relegate his lightest productions to the select domains of art. 2
>
> On the whole, as far as we can classify him, he is at the head of his class, and in other respects, a class by himself. 3

This critic calls occasional verse poetry of the secondary order of expression and praises Dr. Holmes for the attractive manner in which he dealt with this verse; for a "true faculty is requisite" to insure a worthy result. This authority affirms :

> With his own growth...his brilliant occasional pieces strengthened in thought, wit, and feeling. With respect to his style, there is no one more free from structural whim. He has an ear for the "classical" forms of the old English verse, the academic measures which still bid fair to hold their own...His way of thought,like his style, is straightforward and sententious. 4

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1. Ibid., p.xci.
2. Edmund C. Stedman, Poets of America, p.59.
3. Ibid., p.276.
4. Ibid., p.288.

As one turns the pages of Holmes's book of poetry, one is amazed at the "phantasmagory" of the songs, odes, and rhymed addresses, of so many years; collegiate and civic glories; tributes to princes, embassies, generals, heroes; welcome to novelists and poets; eulogies of the dead; verse both inaugural and dedicatory; stanzas read at literary breakfasts, New England dinners, municipal and country banquets; "odes votal, nuptial, and mortuary"; metrical poems in celebration of the meetings of the medical association- "to which he is so loyal--bristling with scorn of quackery and challenge to opposing systems"; not only equal to all occasions, but steadily increasing in his ability to do justice to these occasions. One half of his early collections is made up from verses of this sort, and represents four-fifths of his verse during a period of thirty years. 1 Verily, the versatility, acumen, and adaptability of this genius are powerfully displayed in this literary collection !

One authority inquires :

> Now what has carried Holmes so bravely through all this if not a kind of spiritual masterhood, an individuality, humor, touch, that we shall not see again ? Thus, we come, in fine, to be sensible to the distinctive gift of this poet. The achievement for which he must be noted is that in the field, the most arduous and least attractive, he should bear himself with such zest and fitness as to be numbered among poets, and should do honor to an

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1. Ibid., p.290.

> office which they chiefly dread or mistrust, and which is little calculated to excite their inspiration. 1

We would say, in addition, that the innate kindliness in Mr. Holmes's nature was largely the reason for the response to the many demands made upon him; that there are few occasions on which one finds record of his declining, and this, in spite of the fact that he well knew that many of the poems he wrote would be considered by critics of little value as poetry. But good nature and the love of his neighbors made him reluctant to refuse them. One truth is evident throughout all of them- he never contented himself with a slovenly or hasty piece of work. Another critic asserts :

> A man so charmingly capable of entering into social occasions without cynicism, scepticism, or even the normal amount of grown-up detachment of haughtiness, is almost divinely appointed to express heartily, enthusiastically, and convincingly, the appropriate, agreeable, or idealistic sentiments of society. 2
>
> "As one glances over the welter of poems which he read at celebrations and public dinners", observes another, "one is reminded of the lines of a somewhat similar poet, Thomas Moore:
>
> 'I feel like one
> Who treads alone
> Some banquet-hall deserted
> Whose lights are fled,
> Whose garlands dead,
> And all but he departed.'" 3

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1. Loc. cit.
2. S.I. Hayakawa and H.M. Jones, op. cit., p.xcv.
3. Augustus H. Strong, American Poets and Their Theology, p.353.

He concludes that society-verse has small meaning after a generation has passed. Mr. Holmes well knew how fleeting was the significance of poems such as these, for he said upon one occasion, "You understand the difference between the fireworks on the evening of July Fourth, and the look of the frames the next morning ! "

Since he was content, at times, to give temporary pleasure as any entertainer might do, we should not censure him for this type of light verse which adds to the gaiety of life; instead, we should be thankful that poetry has so wide a realm that it can include innocent mirth.

Mr. Holmes's success was largely due to the fact that he was always able to establish a relation of sympathy between himself and his reader, or listeners, by expressing thoughts that we all think, but rarely know how to express.

In referring to writers of society verse of Holmes's generation, one critic says :

> There was a time when half of our public men wrote poems for recitation, when every set oration was paired with a platform poem. But in this department Holmes always was an easy winner and of all these orators in rhyme, Holmes is the one that survives to this day. 1

Walter Jerrold, in speaking of Holmes's vers d'occasion, feels that "there is a rare pathetic touch" about some of these verses and this touch is not too obvious even to those reading the poet in their study :

- -

1. E.C. Stedman, op. cit., p.283.

> It is found where the poet explains how well he is aware that all his listeners have come ready to smile at the anticipated "funny things", to pucker their lips at his first pun, and to roar with laughter at the coming mot. 1

> I know my audience. All the gay and young
> Love the light antics of a playful tongue;
> And these, remembering some expansive line
> My lips let loose among the nuts and wine,
> Are all impatience till the opening pun
> Proclaims the witty shamfight has begun.
> Two-fifths at least, if not the total half,
> Have come infuriate for an earthquake laugh. 2

Mr. Jerrold continues as follows :

> They have come to be amused and tickled by the humorist and wit rather than to be elevated and edified by the poet and philosopher. Yet though the poet recognizes this, and in his quiet, half-playful, half-reproving way thus tells his audience that he does so, he manages to give them much wisdom and much beautiful poetry, along with the quaintness of expression and illustration- the verbal quips and cranks which had come to be looked upon as the most important of his literary merchandise, and the rightful due of those who listened to him. This character for pleasantry which he had so early acquired-"Urania", from which the above passage is quoted was written in 1846- has probably been largely responsible for the coloring of the whole, or at any rate a great part, of Holmes's poetic works. 3

In this same poem, "Urania", lest we may think he is lacking in seriousness, Mr. Holmes informs us that he does not choose to be considered simply a "stage buffoon" :

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1. Walter Jerrold, Oliver Wendell Holmes, p.31.
2. O.W. Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.33.
3. Walter Jerrold, Op. cit., p.32.

Think not I come, in manhood's fiery noon,
To steal the laurels from the stage buffoon;
His sword of lath the harlequin may wield;
Behold the star upon my lifted shield !
Though the just critic pass my humble name,
And sweeter lips have drained the cup of fame,
While my gay stanza pleased the banquet's lords,
The soul within was tuned to deeper chords !
Say, shall my arms, in other conflicts taught,
To swing aloft the ponderous mace of thought,
Lift in obedience to a school-girl's law,
Mirth's tinsel wand or laughter's tickling straw? 1

Mr. Stedman claims that :

> The distinction between his poetry and that of the new maker of society-verse, is that his is a survival, theirs the attempted revival, of something that has gone before. He wears the seal of "that past Georgian day" by direct inheritance, not from the old time in England but from that time in England's lettered colonies, whose inner sections still preserve the hereditary language and customs as they are scarcely to be found elsewhere. His work is all emblematic of the past as are the stairways and handcarvings in various houses of Cambridge, Portsmouth, and Norwich. 2
>
> His unique series of pieces are as vivacious as those of Tom Moore, but with the brain of New England in them, and notions and instances without end. How sure is their author's sense of the fitness of things, his gift of adaptability to the occasion- to how many occasions and what different things ! 3

Holmes has told us of the origin of many of these verses :

I'm a florist in verse, and what would people say,
If I came to a banquet without my bouquet?

And in another place :

Here's the cousin of a king,-
Would I do the civil thing?
Here's the firstborn of a queen;
Here's a slant-eyed Mandarin.

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1. O.W.Holmes, Op. cit., p.44.
2. E.C.Stedman, Op. cit., p.274.
3. Ibid., p.290

In still another poem, "A Vision of Life", he says :

> The well-known weakness of the rhyming race
> Is to be ready in and out of place;
> No bashful glow, no timid begging off,
> No sudden hoarseness, no discordant cough
> (These coy excuses which your singers plead,
> When faintly uttering:"No, I can't, indeed.")
> Impedes your rhymester in his prompt career.
> Give him but hint; and won't the muse appear ?

One noted authority declares :

> It is almost impossible to impart by quotations the spirit and hilarity of the best of these "vers d'occasion."
>
> There is a whet and stimulant in every line; the humor of them is interior, below the midriff, and penetrates the thick integument of care and gravity with a slow delicious feeling that finally breaks out into uncontrollable laughter. 1

Some of Holmes' best occasional poems are his anniversary poems, and among them the ones written for Phi Beta Kappa are especially outstanding. "Post-Prandial" is one of these, and its rare fun will not be understood by those who are ignorant of the fact that Wendell Phillips, who is a cousin of Holmes, and Charles G. Leland (Hans Breitmann) were performers on a certain public occasion that gave rise to the poem under consideration. The vivacity of his mind and facility of expression are strikingly exhibited in such passages, as :

> Hans Breitmann gif a barty,- where is dot barty now ?
> On every shelf where wit is stored to smooth the careworn brow !
> A health to stout Hans Breitmann ! How long before we see
> Another Hans as handsome,- as bright a man as he !

- -

1. W.S. Kennedy, Oliver Wendell Holmes, p.269.

It is made particularly amusing by the inscription at the beginning of the poem-"Wendell Phillips, Orator; Charles Godfrey Leland, Poet," and the fact that these statements are made in the first two stanzas concerning these men of Dutch descent :

> For the Wendells were low Dutchmen, and all
> their vrows were Vans,
> And the Breitmanns are high Dutchmen,
> and here is honest Hans.
>
> And the Mynheers would have told you to be
> cautious what you said,
> Or else that silver tongue of yours might cost
> your precious head. [1]

Throughout these occasional verses we find that they show no straining after effects, but are written with apparent ease, and that they combine the "qualities which characterize the rest of his poetry"; they are noteworthy, too, for the reason that they invariably represent "the fresh outpourings of a cheerful, healthy, and remarkably ready poetic nature."

In playful mood that is more than half serious, his class poems were written, and they often show the best quality of Dr. Holmes's work as a poet; in fact, we find among this group of poems, "Poems of the Class of '29," the most striking examples of his "vers d'ocassion", a series of poems extending from 1831 to 1889. "This series," comments one critic,"while giving us examples of many different moods, has yet running like a silver thread through all a bright, unfailing, humor-loving optimism." [2]

- -

1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.284.
2. Walter Jerrold, Op. cit., p.49.

"From his nimble tongue as from no other American tongue or pen, tripped the phrase, the epithet on each occasion that fired in every mind the appropriate train", declares one authority and further states :

> These rhythms of an hour were ever fresh, adroit, and correct. His happiest vein was that when he most resembled his conversation, when he felt like a jockey on the race-course, a good Yankee jockey, rejoicing in his own vernacular, and confident, old as his horse might be, that he would win the bet. [1]

And in this vein Holmes always did win the bet, for he knew :

> . . . the little arts that please,
> Bright looks, the cheerful language
> of the eye
> The neat crisp question and the gay reply.

One critic who calls him a "literary handyman", because of his adaptability to these "literary occasions", is using a very light term, unworthy of Mr. Holmes's best efforts. How much better it is to think of him as a "florist" with his "metrical bouquets", as he calls them, and of these occasional verses as " verses torn up by the roots " !

After Holmes was chosen as class-poet, he wrote forty-four successive poems which he read at the annual reunion of his class, until at the last meeting, in 1889, only three survivors were present. The following stanzas are chosen from the poem which introduces the series, and from the poem which closes it. The first is entitled "Bill and Joe", a portion of which has been quoted in a previous chapter : [2]

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1. VanWyck Brooks, The Flowering of New England, p.354.
2. Supra, p.47.

Come, dear old comrade, you and I
Will steal an hour from days gone by,
The shining days when life was new,
And all was bright with morning dew,
The lusty days of long ago
When you were Bill and I was Joe.
. . . . . .
The chaffing young folks stare and say
"See those old buffers, bent and gray,-
They talk like fellows in their teens!
Mad, poor old boys ! That's what it means,"
And shake their heads; they little know
The throbbing hearts of Bill and Joe ! 1

The last of these poems is entitled "After the Curfew" :

The Play is over. While the light
Yet lingers in the darkening hall,
I come to say a last Good-night
Before the final Exeunt all.

We gathered once, a joyous throng;
The jovial toasts went gayly round;
With jest and laugh, and shout and song,
We made the floors and walls resound.

We come with feeble steps and slow,
A little band of four or five,
Left from the wrecks of long ago,
Still pleased to find ourselves alive.

Alive ! How living,too, are they
Whose memories it is ours to share !
Spread the long table's full array,-
There sits a ghost in every chair !
. . . . . .
So ends "The Boys",- a lifelong play,
We too must hear the Prompter's call
To fairer scenes and brighter days :
Farewell ! I let the curtain fall. 2

It is difficult to select from his "Poems of the Class of '29 " some that are better than others; as examples of occasional verse, they are all excellent. It is well to read them all, and to follow that "silver thread" that runs

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1. O.W.Holmes, Op. cit ., p.113.
2. O.W.Holmes, Op. cit.,p.148.

through each one of them. It is with a feeling of deep sadness that we read the last one, "After the Curfew" (1889), knowing it is the last of the class poems and realizing that the class, made up of merchants, statesmen, physicians, authors, and other men of dignity, had dwindled to a few. At the meeting the following year, held for the last time at the Parker House, in Boaton, the annual gathering had dwindled to three: S.F.Smith, the author of "America", the Reverend Samuel May, the abolitionist, and Holmes.

In commenting on these class poems, one authority remarks:

> How strong the influence of Holmes's verses was in cementing the friendships of the Class of '29 and keeping the members so closely together for over sixty years after their graduation, they only would be able to tell. We are able to conjecture,however, that the influence was a great one; and if occasional verse may be judged not only by its expression of a group unanimity, but by its power to maintain unanimity, we are certainly safe in regarding Holmes's work as eminent examples of its kind. 1

The real merit of these class poems lies in the charm of their literary perfection and their representation, as we follow them, throughout the many years, of that consciousness on the part of our Laughing Philosopher that life is made up of smiles and tears and, in the latter years, the tears predominate. Furthermore, in the reflections of our Philosopher, on these facts, we still see his optimism uppermost !

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1. S.I.Hayakawa and H.M.Jones, Op.cit., p. xciii.

Farewell ! our skies are darkened and yet the
stars will shine,
We'll close our ranks together and still
fall into line
Till one is left, one only, to mourn for all
the rest;
And Heaven bequeath their memories to him
who loves us best ! 1

We might take two stanzas from this same poem, "The Last Survivor", and using his own words intended for another, apply them to Holmes himself :

And he,- what subtle phrases their varying
light must blend
To paint as each remembers our many-
featured friend !
His wit a flash auroral that laughed in
every look,
His talk a sunbeam broken on the
ripples of a brook.

Or, fed from thousand sources, a fountain's
glittering jet,
Or careless handfuls scattered of
diamonds sparks unset;
Ah ! sketch him, paint him, mold him, in
every shape you will,
He was himself- the only- the one- un-
pictured still. 2

Dr. Holmes was naturally not content with being "the favorite writer of occasional verses" as the only measuring stick of his ability, for well he knew the transitory nature of fame attached to such a cognomen; and as he grew older, his uneasiness was expressed in the following words :

> It seems to me that I have done almost enough of this work, too much, some of my friends will say, perhaps. But it has been as much from good nature as from vanity that I have so often got up and jangled my small string of bells.

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1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.140.
2. Ibid., p.141.

> I hold it to be a gift of a certain value to be able to give that slight passing spasm of pleasure which a few ringing couplets often cause, read at the right moment. Though they are for the most part to poetry as the beating of a drum or the tinkling of a triangle is to the harmony of a band, yet it is not everybody who can get their limited significance out of these humble instruments.
>
> I think, however, that I have made myself almost too common by my readiness to oblige people on all sorts of occasions. 1

No, we can, in truth, say to Dr. Holmes, we would not have you different; because these responses of yours to public occasions express the magnanimity of your soul and help, too, in the commemorating of many important historic events; your accompanying music made by the "jangle of your string of bells", (so representative of your merry mood), and the "beating of the drum", and "tinkling of the triangle" (so significant in the harmony of the band which is in demand on all public occasions) make of these poems and your humorous and kindly nature one harmonious whole. If there are some of these poems, not so nearly perfect as we might expect from one so capable of the best, we must be mindful of the incessant demands made on our poet and forgive him, keeping in mind that slogan from the vernacular of great literary critics- "Homer sometimes nods".

From the foregoing statements concerning occasional verse it is evident that : (1) as a refined, cultured

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1. J.T. Morse, Jr., editor, Life and Letters of O.W. Holmes, p.230.

gentleman , and a man who believed in his age, Holmes was peculiarly fitted to celebrate it in verse; (2) his wit and humor helped to make these verses successful; (3) to understand these poems, a reader must be informed regarding the persons and occasions they celebrate, and enter sympathetically into the mood of the audience and poet; (4) Holmes's wit, conviction, wisdom, and scholarly polish relegate his lightest productions to the select domain of art; (5) he is the Dean among our writers of society verse; (6) this field of poetry, being the most arduous and least attractive, is avoided by poets; (7) his innate kindliness made him respond to the many demands upon him; (8) he never contented himself with a slovenly piece of work; (9) of the many society verse writers of his day, he alone survives; (10) some of his best occasional poems are his anniversary poems, particularly those of the Class of '29; (11) some are very patriotic; (12) through all runs, like a silver thread, his humor-loving optimism; (13) the incessant demands on him made some poems inferior to others; (14) censure should be avoided as "Homer sometimes nods".

SATIRE

INTRODUCTION

Where is the Moloch of your father's creed,
Whose fires of torment burned for span-long
babes ?
Fit object for a tender mother's love !
Why not ? It was a bargain duly made
For these same infants through the
surety's act
Intrusted with their all for earth and
heaven,
By Him who chose their guardian,
knowing well
His fitness for the task- this, even this,
Was the true doctrine of only yesterday
As thoughts are reckoned,- and today you hear
In words that sound as if from human
tongues
Those monstrous, uncouth horrors of the
past
That blot the blue of heaven and shame the
earth
As would the Saurians of the age of slime,
Awaking from their stony sepulchres
And wallowing hateful in the eye of day !

- Oliver Wendell Homes.

CHAPTER V

SATIRE

As a means of analyzing Mr. Holmes's satirical poems, it is well to consider the words used by one critic who defined satire as -"the comic contradiction between the spiritual and natural man in actual life".

In order that satire may be of the highest type, it must conceal under its comic mask a serious purpose. With Aristophanes, satire became excellent criticism, a "part of a larger criticism of contemporary life". In the "Frogs" (405 B.C.) can be found the lament of Dionysius that "good poets are dead ; only the false live on ", and Aristophanes' objection to lack of content: modern poets are "leaves without fruit; trills in the empty air, and starling chatter mutilating art ".[1]

Likewise, Oliver W. Holmes used satire for the purpose of ridiculing modern rhymesters,and of this poetry, as recorded in an earlier chapter, "A Familiar Letter"[2] is a very good example; however, his geniality was as characteristic of him as a writer as well as a man, and although pestered by numerous inferior poetasters, his geniality did not desert him even in writing his satires. One stanza is particularly illustrative of this phase of his satirical verse, where he lampoons versifiers :

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1. J.H.Smith and E.W.Parks, The Great Critics, p.2
2. Supra, pp.27-28.

So perhaps, after all, it's as well to be quiet,
If you've nothing you think is worth saying in prose,
As to furnish a meal of their cannibal diet
To the critics, by publishing, as you propose. [1]

The same geniality is apparent in "Cacoethes Scribendi" quoted in a previous chapter.

The satiric turn to his humor is frequently given in "snatches of his song as though the philosopher were driving a truth home with a weapon lent him by the poet." The following quotations will illustrate this point; the first of which is from "The Schoolboy", and Holmes is speaking of the pen :

Too ready servant, whose deceitful ways
Full many a slipshod line, alas ! betrays ;
Hence of the rhyming thousand not a few [2]
Have builded worse- a great deal- than they knew.

And in another, to James Russell Lowell :

And if we lose him our lament will be [3]
We have "five hundred"-not "as good as he."

Again:

Strong is the moral blister that will draw
Laid on the conscience of the Man of Law,
Whom blindfold Justice lends her eyes to see [4]
Truth in the scale that holds his promise fee.

Du Bellay cautions poets regarding the use of satire. Its use is beneficial if they employ it "to censure vices of our time" and not "call by name vicious persons"; furthermore, he advises them to use Horace for a model, who, according to Quintilian, held first place among satirists.[5]

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1. O.W. Holmes, Complete Poetical Works, p.232.
2. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.258.
3. Ibid., p.275.
4. Ibid., p.265.
5. Du Bellay, "Defense and Illustration", J.H. Smith and E.W. Parks, Op. cit., p.176.

Mr. Holmes, whose satires are Horatian in execution, employs his wit in satirical poems not against "vicious persons called by name", but against the evils and vices of his time; namely, hyper-Calvinism, disloyalty,hypocrisy, quackery, and clinging to out-moded traditions. He differs from the satirists conspicuous in the age of Pope for leveling their attacks at other literary protagonists or critics against whom they held some personal spite.

"A bad satire," says Dr. Holmes, "made up of prejudice and personal feeling, is a terrible thing; for the ill-natured will love it for its malignity, and the envious applaud it for its injustice, and the imbecile believe it for its audacity."

Mr. Holmes's metrical satires, one critic claims, are of the amiable sort that debars him from kinship with the Juvenals of old, or the Popes and Churchills of more recent times. He says :

> There is more real satire in one of Hosea Biglow's lyrics than in all our laughing philosopher's irony, rhymed and unrhymed. Yet he is a keen observer of the follies and chances which make its food. Give him personages, reminiscences, manners,to touch upon, and he is quite at home. 1

This well-known authority does not define his conception of <u>real satire</u>. There are two kinds represented by Sir Philip Sidney:

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1. Edmund C. Stedman, <u>Poets of America</u>, p.303.

> The bitter, but wholesome Iambic, which rubs the galled minde, in making shame the trumpet of villanie, with bolde and open crying out against naughtiness; or the Satirick, who "in his craftiness touches every fault of his laughing friend." Who sportingly never leaveth, until hee make a man laugh at folly, and at length ashamed, to laugh at himselfe; which he cannot avoyd, without avoyding the follie. Who while "he plays about the very fibres of the heart" gives us to feele, how many head-aches a passionate life bringeth us to. How when all is done, "What we seek is even at Ulubrae," according to Horace, "if we not lack a tranquil mind"...(who representeth)... the common errors of our life-- in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be. So as it is impossible, that any beholder can be content to be such a one.[1]

Judging by the latter and very apt characterization of a real satirist offered by Sir Philip Sidney, we must admit Holmes is a satirist of a high order, indeed. For, "nothing can more open his eyes (the offender's) than to finde his own actions contemptibly set forth"[2] is a method used by the Doctor, who both in literary theory and practice, always attached importance to sentiments ; for all his rationalism, he believed that reason was not enough to move people to action, to influence their behavior, to change their opinions or attitudes; and so he proceeded to accomplish the desired changes for the better in the spiritual and mental attitudes of his patients by the metrical pills of his own prescription, necessarily bitter, but sugar-coated withal.

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1. Sir Philip Sidney, "Apologie" cited by J.H. Smith and E.W. Parks, Op. cit., pp. 209-210.

2. Ibid., p.209.

Holmes was too noble a character to make use of that satire which Boileau calls :

> Pleasant detraction,that by singing goes
> From mouth to mouth,and as it marches grows.

But Dr. Holmes :

> By mild reproofs recovered minds diseased,
> And,sparing persons, innocently pleased. 1

Holmes's prescriptions, moreover, were written by one of those philosophers :

> who know that wit is best conveyed to us in the most easy language; and is most to be admired when a great thought comes dressed in words so commonly received, that it is understood by the meanest apprehension, as the best meat is the most easily digested. 2

The sugar-coated pills of Holmes's satire were much more readily swallowed than the "purgative of Pope's which was too painful in its operation" or the "large dose of ipecacuanha" that Swift insisted on, which, "though readily swallowed from the fame of the physician, yet if the patient had any delicacy of taste, he threw up the remedy, instead of the disease".[3] The satirical pellets that were prescribed by Dr. Holmes were all effectual, but not all of the same potency, for there were some especially cankerous and cantankerous maladies, which sometimes riled the sweet temperament of the little Doctor, so that he had to resort at times to more potent medicine than the sugar-coated variety; and although, at such times, he lost some of his

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1. Nicholas Boileau,"The Art of Poetry",cited by J.H.Smith and E.W. Parks, Op.cit., pp.283-292.
2. John Dryden, "Dramatic Poetry""cited by J.H. Smith and E.W. Parks, Op.cit., p.283.
3. Young's "Conjectures", Op. cit., p.435.

geniality, he never lost his ability to see the humorous side of the situation, nor did he lose that ready wit for prescribing a somewhat stronger dose.

His three most famous satires represent three very strong doses of Holmes's own patented brand- "guaranteed to cure": "The Moral Bully", "The Sweet Little Man", and "The Old Man of the Sea". After acquaintance with these three poems, they somehow just stick in the memory. According to one who knew Holmes well :

> Tolerant as his charitable philosophy was of the common frailties and errors of humanity, from the bottom of his heart he hated sham, hypocrisy,and the oppression of the helpless; and he lashed them without mercy whenever he found them hidden, even if it involved the "dusting of a prominent citizen's broadcloth". 1

His three famous satires mentioned in the preceding paragraph were all written within the same period. "The Moral Bully", as its title suggests, is a satire on the hypocrite :

> ...whose extended glove
> Points to the text of universal love,
>
> ...his acrid words
> Turn the sweet milk of kindness
> Into curds
> Or with grim logic prove, beyond debate,
> That all we love is worthiest of hate. 2

The "Sweet Little Man" has been discussed in a preceding chapter, and, of course, satirizes the "Stay-at-Home Rangers" who lacked the patriotism to fight for their country.[3]

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1. J.E.A.Smith, Poet Among the Hills, p.167.

2. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.84.

3. Supra, pp.3-5.

Here are some additional stanzas, other than the one already quoted, that give evidence of Holmes's genius as a real satirist :

> Now, while our soldiers are fighting our battles,
> Each at his post to do all he can,
> Down among rebels and contraband chattels,
> What are you doing, my sweet little man ?
> . . . . . .
> Have we a nation to save ? In the first place
> Saving ourselves is a sensible plan,-
> Surely the spot where there's shooting's
> the worst place
> Where I can stand, says the sweet little man.
> . . . . . .
> Now then,nine cheers for the Stay-at-Home Ranger !
> Blow the great fish-horn and beat the big pan !
> First in the field that is farthest from danger
> Take your white-feather plume,sweet little man ! 1

In "The Old Man of the Sea" or a "Nightmare Dream by Daylight" Holmes does some clever lampooning of the man who is such a bore that he :

> Clings to your side like a leech,like a leech,
> And you leave your lost bride in the lurch,

And again later at the sight of the dreadful old man he complains :

> Yea, I quiver and quake,and I take, and I take,
> To my legs with what vigor I can. 2

The following apt terms for depicting the Old Man show the intensity of Holmes's language in describing that tenacious Old Man's grasp: "polypus-grip in his hands", "his claw on your sleeve", "he grapples you tight","clings to your side like a leech", and "stuck to my skirts like a bur". It is this imagery which contributes much to the humor.

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1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.197.
2. Ibid., p.110.

"Brother Jonathan's Lament for Sister Caroline" was written just before the South's attack on Fort Sumter and the tone is much milder than "One Country", written later. A portion of each will be ample for comparison in order to bring out the different tones and moods of Holmes when his patriotism is aroused to its greater pitch.

She has gone,-she had left us in passion and pride,-
Our stormy-browed sister, so long at our side !
She has torn her own star from our firmament's glow,
And turned on her brother the face of a foe ! 1

One Country

One country ! Treason's writhing asp
Struck madly at her girdle's clasp,
And Hatred wrenched with might and main
To rend its welded links in twain,
While Mammon hugged its golden calf
Content to take one broken half,
While thankless churls stood idly by
And heard unmoved a nation's cry ! 2

"It is a question how to live as well as how to express life", and Dr. Holmes furnishes us with a splendid example of living so honestly and so genuinely that his verse is, in reality, a reflection of the man himself.

We get beautiful effects from his wit,-"all the prismatic colors" as he calls them- but although his poetry reflects the "rainbow tints for special effects" he always "keeps its essential object in the purest white light of truth", and these are the important tenets of a doctrine

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1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.111.

2. Ibid., p. 193.

that he had always aimed to fulfill.

His many droll illustrations of the inconsistencies of human nature furnish us with some excellent examples of profound satire, and his peculiar merit lies in that his wit is so infused with fancy. As a poet of society, delineator of mankind, and exposer of those motives which may be called acquired, no one surpasses him. Where Pope is an intellectual observer of mankind and a describer of personal weaknesses for his own delight, Holmes is the observer and the physician for those weaknesses. Pope's masterpiece, "The Dunciad", is even nastier than it is witty; savage and vindictive, it delights in detecting and ridiculing the blemishes of individual men; Holmes's masterpiece, "Astraea: the Balance of Illusions", satirizes mankind itself, and he mourns over discovering the ills that beset the nation :

> But how, alas ! among our eager race,
> Shall smiling candor show her girlish face ?
> What place is secret to the meddling crew,
> Whose trade is settling what we all shall do ?
> What verdict sacred from the busy fools,
> That sell the jargon of their outlaw schools ?
> What pulpit certain to be never vexed
> What libels sanctioned by a holy text ?
> Where, O my country, is the spot that yields
> The freedom fought for on a hundred fields ?

And then in the tones of a gentle physician speaking to a sick patient:

> Briefly and gently let the task be tried
> To touch some frailties on their tender side;
> Not to dilate on each imagined wrong,
> And spoil at once our temper and our song,

But once or twice a passing gleam to throw
On some rank failings ripe enough to show,
Patterns of others,-made of common stuff,-
The world will furnish parallels enough,-
Such as bewilder their contracted view,
Who makes one pupil do the work of two;
Who following nature, where her tracks divide,
Drive all their passions in the narrower side,
And pour the phials of their virtuous wrath
On half of mankind that take the wider path.

It makes the dear Doctor grieve that he should have to discover the ills for which the patients were sometimes unwilling to accept the results of his diagnosis:

Hard is the task to point in civil phrase
One's own dear people's foolish works or ways;
Woe to the friend that marks a touchy fault,
Himself obnoxious to the world's assault !

But he warns them against further danger of infection :

And Oh, remember the indignant press;
Honey is bitter to its fond caress;
But the black venom that its hate lets fall
Would shame to sweetness the hyena's gall !

Finally,to the wounds of mankind, the Doctor applies a soothing balm in the words of a poet, teacher, and philosopher :

These lines may teach, rough-spoken though they be,
Thy gentle creed, divinest Charity !
Truth is at heart not always as she seems,
Judged by our sleeping or our waking dreams. 1

In "The Living Temple", Doctor Holmes makes an attack on that phase of Puritanism which regarded the flesh with fear and contempt as the vessel of corruption, but it is well to notice the mildness and exquisiteness of the satire expressed in the lines that follow those containing such phrases

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1. Ibid., p.333.

as, "His blazing throne", "thy wondrous frame", "burden of decay", "throbbing slave", "crimson jet", "throbbing heart", "crossing tides", "unchanging flame ", "living marbles ", "silvery throng", "guiding reins", "myriad rings", "trembling chains", "threaded zone", "seven-hued light", "lucid globes", "cloven sphere", "lightning gleams", and "glassy threads ". These verses represent the prayer of the gentle and compassionate heart :

> O Father ! grant Thy love divine
> To make these mystic temples Thine !
> When wasting age and wearying strife
> Have sapped the leaning walls of life,
> When darkness gathers over all,
> And the last tottering pillars fall,
> Take the poor dust Thy mercy warms,
> And mould it into heavenly forms ! [1]

In the section entitled "Worship" of his long philosophical poem, "Wind-Clouds and Star-Drifts", written in blank verse,he challenges the Calvinist conception of man's religious obligations,and asserts the claims of"Nature",but he himself doubts that "you or I"as he expresses it in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, "can ever get the iron of Calvinism out of our souls" [2]. Some of the following passages, in his best satiric vein, reproach hyper-Calvinism for its doctrine of " a chosen few", and what Holmes called the heathenism associated with it and the morbidity resulting from it. In speaking of the God of the Calvinists, he says :

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1. Ibid., p.101.
2. John T.Morse,Jr., Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes , p. 246.

The same who offers to a chosen few
The right to praise him in eternal song
While a vast shrieking world of endless
woe
Blends its dread chorus with their
rapturous hymn.

And in another passage :

...today you hear
In words that sound as if from human tongues
Those monstrous, uncouth horrors of the past
That blot the blue of heaven and shame the earth.

Again:

.....,an outcast in a world of fire,
Condemned to be the sport of cruel fiends,
Sleepless, unpitying, masters of the skill
To wring the maddest ecstasies of pain
From worn-out souls that only ask to die. 1

In a much lighter vein, Holmes strikes at the foibles and vices of society by using the following couplets, a part of a satirical poem more amusing, but not on the high philosophical level as "Wind-Clouds and Star-Drifts", nor are these couplets couched in such splendid language; however, they "hit the nail on the head", and, written in the vernacular of everyday life as they are, perhaps, accomplished more in exposing vice and hypocrisy to the average layman:

What a Dollar Will Buy

Listen to me and I will try
To tell you what a dollar will buy.

A dollar will buy a Voter's conscience,
Or a book of "Fiftieth-Thousand"Nonsense;

It will buy a glass of rum or gin
At a Deacon's store or a Temperance inn.

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1. O.W. Holmes, Op. cit., p.171.

The Deacon will show you how to mix it,
Or the Temperance landlord stay and fix it. 1

Dr. Holmes is not, strictly speaking, a poet of didacticism; but he compounds marvelous potions containing ingredients that are good for the social, the moral, and the physical welfare of man. By these mixtures, delightful in their taste and sparkling in their effervescence, and containing, withal, the curative properties that bubble from the mineral springs of his animated personality, he does, most assuredly, prescribe according to the correct literary formula; for in obeying the tenets held by the critics of the art of poetry, his poetry does teach, delight, and move.

As one critic, in discussing writers of satire and their satirical purgatives, concludes : "Verse made only on satire belongs to a lower order than the satirical verse of Holmes."

The wit of Holmes, like that of any other good poet of satire, has been the faculty that ripened last; the overflow of their strength, their experience, and their sympathetic understanding, accompanied by a desire to do something to improve unsatisfactory mankind. As Victor Hugo says, "The modern muse will see things in a higher and broader light... It will realize that everything in creation is not humanly beautiful....we see a principle unknown to the ancients, a new type introduced into poetry." And this new type, of which Mr. Hugo speaks, is the type which deals humorously

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1. J.E.A.Smith, The Poet Among the Hills, p.15.

with the foibles of mankind under "the influence of that spirit of Christian melancholy and philosophical criticism". 1

This humorous and witty type, with its blend of Christian charity, is best represented by our Laughing Philosopher, Oliver Wendell Holmes; and in his satires, which show the genuine poet and the true reflection of the manners and follies of his age, "without which satire would fail alike of its purpose and its name", his nationality is the pervading and guiding genius of it all. No other American poet and humorist is so thoroughly representative of our nationalism.

The essential points made in this chapter dealing with satirical verse are as follows :(1) satire of a high grade must have a serious purpose; (2) it is best when it becomes part of that larger criticism of contemporary life dealing with the vices and foibles of mankind; (3) individuals should not be satirized by being called by name; (4) of the ancients, Horace and not Juvenal makes a good model; (5) satire of the highest grade is used to satirize conditions for the purpose of improvement instead of individual persons for the purpose of ridicule; (6) satire should never be vicious; (7) it is most effectual when it is wittily expressed in"easy" language; (8) verse made only on satire is not of a high order; (9) in a good poet ability to write satire of a high quality ripens last; (10) Holmes's satire fulfills all the essential requirements mentioned herein, and, in addition, rises

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1. Victor Hugo,"Preface to Cromwell", cited by Smith and Parks, Op. cit., pp.707-708.

above the satires of others because of his geniality, sympathetic understanding, philosophical criticism, and Christian charity; (11) his satire is more thoroughly representative of our nationality than that of any other American poet.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In making a comparison of the witty and humorous verse of Oliver Wendell Holmes with that of Eugene Field, it becomes apparent that the two are very similar in their enjoyment of the roles of Yorick and Mercutio, and that their mutual possession of a deep, ripe humor that lies as close to tears as to laughter with"a rich vein of pure gold of human sympathy running through it " is characteristic of their poetry.

In their satires which represent the most important phases of their wit and humor, while Field uses his powers to lampoon local politicians in a somewhat mildly sarcastic, but droll manner(the sarcasm of which is unintelligible to those unfamiliar with local politics), Holmes uses his satirical gifts in a broader sense, for the purpose of reforms that are nationalistic in their scope, and delivered in scathing language that is intelligible to all.

In contrasting Holmes and Lowell, we find that the latter uses his powers of wit and humor for satire (expressed in his inimitable mimicry of the Yankee dialect), also as a means to accomplish reforms, but expressive of only one phase of nationalism; and furthermore, that he confesses, perhaps unintentionally, his satire is lacking in being

truly effectual, for in the words of Parson Wilbur as expressed in "The Bigelow Papers"- "the most potent weapon is ridicule providing a button of good-nature is on the point of it"- and this "button of good-nature" is found lacking in Lowell's satire. Holmes's scathing language, when he chooses to make use of it, is always tempered by his merry humor. Lowell depends largely upon his employment of dialect for producing humorous effects, while Holmes uses a variety of techniques, particularly very striking incongruities and a surprising turn of thought.

The ability to write glittering epigrams and stinging social satires that was mutually shared by Lowell and Holmes was not a part of Riley's humorous nature; but he does share with Holmes that power to produce incongruity of imagery and the element of surprise, two of the most important factors of humor. Both Holmes and Riley were fond of the cheery and hopeful things. They had the power to discover the quaintly humorous near at hand and also to express these ideas in transparent language, shrewd and bright with native metaphor. But Holmes surpasses Riley in both polish and wit.

In analyzing the style of Holmes's witty and humorous verse, we find that in meter there is some resemblance to eighteenth-century verse. It is natural for a poet to use the meters and patterns of poetry with which his memory was

early stocked, and Holmes found that the heroic couplet was the best vehicle for the expression of his wit and humor; but the couplet was not used exclusively by him. Holmes is unique and original in subject matter, and no one detested plagiarism more than he did.

Since memory and temperament are the controlling forces in artistic work,Holmes found the classical style, congenial to his taste, and it is as a classicist that he can best be classified. Since classicism and romanticism always exist in conjunction with each other, we find his verse often distinguished by the best traits of romanticism. He shows the conservatism of the aristocrat in his literary leanings, as he felt there was much to be condemned in modern poetry- "the habit of chewing on rhymes without sense or soul to match them", the use of worn-out rhymes "vulgarized by everybody's use", and a lack of decorum and perfection of verse .

In judging Holmes by the tenets of the great literary critics, it becomes obvious that he is in truth a real poet. The ideas so dear to Wordsworth- elimination of abstract ideas, keeping the Reader in the company of flesh and blood, little falsehood of description, abstaining from the use of many expressions repeated by bad Poets, making use of language that is similar to prose, and using meter that is regular and uniform instead of the " arbitrary diction subject to infinite caprices " are all observed by Holmes. He is ,too, what

Wordsworth describes as essential for being a poet: " a man speaking to men; a man endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul than are supposed to be common among mankind".

In applying Wordsworth's theories to Holmes's lyrical classic,"The Last Leaf",definite proof was obtained that Holmes is a real poet with romantic tendencies.

Literary criteria chosen from such great critics as, Coleridge, Shelley, Poe, Hazlitt, Hugo, De Quincey, and Emerson were applied to that masterpiece of Holmes's-"The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay"-with the satisfaction of finding that Holmes was able to pass muster with flying colors.

Dr. Holmes has found his themes everywhere,but most of all in his heart and to the heart they have been sent-a sure guarantee of his enduring fame. In the employment of his favorite vehicle of expression for these themes,he was superior in his use of it to those whose couplets may be despised now; for to it, he gave not only his intellectual qualities, but his poetical feelings also.

In the use of the heroic couplet,Pope suffers by comparison with Holmes, for Pope used this versification"to express artificial modes of thinking and an artificial state of society". The gay spirit of the genial Holmes is prevalent in all his lines,and his intermittent humor,originality of expression,

sentiment, and clearness of ideas give him the advantage over Pope.

In comparing his couplets to those of George Crabbe, another poet he has been accused of imitating, we find Holmes outshines Crabbe who was careless and slipshod, for Holmes was always Horatian in the execution of his verses, showing evidence of that constant filing demanded of the poet by Horace.

In making an analysis of the wit and humor of Holmes it is necessary to keep in mind the fact that the comic poet is working in a narrower field than the average poet, and that he has a special purpose in writing that one must understand in order to evaluate his work.

Living as he was in a period in which gloom instead of merriment was the order of the day, the measure and quality of Holmes's work appear astounding. Humor was diffused throughout his whole nature, and his fun was that of the fine gentleman that appealed equally to the head and to the heart. He is a humorist of the highest type,for in his love for his countrymen,the wit representative of his keen intellect was used for the development of his humorous literature for their good.

The secret of Holmes's greatness and popularity in the field of wit and humor is his geniality and kindness, at all times, in the use of his intellectual gift of wit softened by the innate humor of his temperament. These gifts were never

used for ulterior purposes.

We should not accuse him of provincialism because a poet must represent his age and habitat, and his poetry should represent truly the ideas and emotions of the people of whom he is a part. Holmes represents not only his locality,but his poetry is also nationalistic in that it represents liberty, patriotism, and the charm of American home-life. We find his "Poor Richard"-like common sense expressed in aphorisms neatly packaged in couplets and used by the Doctor as sugar-coated pills for curing various ills. The constant recurrence of a mirth-provoking humor often allied with high moral truths and touching pathos is highly characteristic of Holmes. "Wit that includes fancy flying off into extravagance with nice compactness of expression" is another method of defining the wit of Holmes. As a humorist, the poet of "The Last Leaf"was among the first to "teach his countrymen that pathos is an equal part of humor; that sorrow is lightened by jest, and jest redeemed by emotion, under most conditions of life".

With his poems of humor,pure and simple,of extravagance and fun,Oliver Wendell Holmes cheered and comforted many, lightened care, and diverted the sorrowing. His poetic ability and sense of humor lasted throughout his long span of life, evidence of which we can find in "The Broomstick Train", written when he was eighty-one.

His numerous poems can be divided into two classes, as to form,—lyrics, and poetic essays in solid couplet verse.

Besides Holmes's humorous poems written solely for pure fun and amusement, three other types in which he excelled are familiar verse, vers d'occasion, and satire.

According to the consensus of critical opinion he is the best familiar verse writer in classic American letters, and the first American to devote himself to any great extent to this type of art- the style acknowledged as the most difficult to succeed in. In these poems the gamut of his humor runs all the way from the fun loving treble of youth to the deeper strain of philosophic maturity. He delights in mingling sincerity and profundity of feeling with a spirit of playfulness and comic ruefulness, and his wit sparkles in all of them.

To Holmes has also been granted, without question, the position of being the greatest writer of society verses in America- some going so far as to say-the best occasional verse writer in the English-speaking world. By virtue of his apt response to the instant call, and of the wit, wisdom, conviction, and the scholarly polish that relegate his lightest productions to the select domain of art, he is considered the Dean among our writers of society verse. It is here that we may find some of his "verses torn up by the roots" because of the many demands on the florist for his "metrical bouquets". One truth is evident throughout all of them-he never contented

himself with a slovenly or hasty piece of work. Some of his best occasional poems are his anniversary poems written for Phi Beta Kappa and the "Poems of the Class of '29 ". If there are some of these poems, not so nearly perfect as we might expect from one so capable of the best, we must be mindful of the incessant demands made on our Poet and forgive him for even "Homer sometimes nods".

In comparing Holmes with three other contemporary poets, something was said about his satires; on further analyses of his satirical poems, we find they represent an excellent criticism of contemporary life in the realms of literature and society. Under this comic mask of writing , his geniality and serious purposes are always characteristic traits, two features that make his satire the highest type of humor, especially when to them are added the skill of a Horace in their execution, and the sparkling wit of our Poet. As a poet of society, delineator of mankind, and exposer of those motives which may be called acquired, no one surpasses him. Where Pope is an intellectual observer of mankind and a describer of personal weaknesses for his own delight, Holmes is the observer and the physician for those weaknesses. To the wounds of mankind he applies a soothing balm concocted by the teacher, philosopher, doctor, and poet. His poetry teaches, delights, and moves because the foibles of mankind are dealt with humorously under"the influence of the spirit

of Christian melancholy and philosophical criticism".

In his satires, which show the genuine poet and the true reflection of the manners and follies of his age, his nationality is the pervading genius of it all. No other American poet and humorist is so thoroughly representative of our nationalism.

ABSTRACT

Statement of the problem.

It is the purpose of this thesis to prove that Oliver Wendell Holmes as a wit and humorist in the field of poetry has been greatly underestimated. Derogatory criticisms have been made concerning his frequent employment of eighteenth-century versification and servile imitation of the neo-classicists, together with the accusation that he unsuccessfully attempted the romantic style of writing, that his wit and humor are British in their manifestations in his poetry, and that, furthermore, he is provincial; therefore, they claim that his poetry cannot be considered nationalistic in its scope.

Methods and procedures.

In preparation for this thesis an investigation was made in the following fields related to wit and humor : (1) the development of wit and humor through the ages; (2) the significant attributes of wit and humor in relation to various types and nationalities; (3) the traits that are representative of the American brand of humor; (4) characteristics of humorous and witty verse; (5) and phases of witty and humourous poetry that are considered nationalistic in scope.

Three poets of the nineteenth century, outstanding in their ability to write humorous and witty verse, were selected, and their poetry was analyzed as a means of comparing their relative merit with the poetry of Holmes.

Next, for the purpose of judging whether Holmes is a genuine poet in the realm of wit and humor, a criterion was formulated by selecting tenets from the doctrines of many of our most famous literary critics, and then by applying these tenets (as to what constitutes real poetry) to the poems of Holmes, his ability as a poet became evident.

In order to evaluate the skill, humor, wit,and versatility of Holmes, a study was made of his many types of poetry; several books, essays, and magazine articles that have a bearing on the subject were read; and, finally, poems were selected and analyzed by the investigator.

Findings.

As a result of this investigation, the following facts have been deduced: (1) Holmes surpasses Field, Riley, and Lowell in the realm of wit and humor; (2) the influence of the neo-classicists is traceable in his meters only; (3) it was natural for Holmes to use metrical patterns with which he was most familiar; (4) he found the heroic couplet the most suitable vehicle for his humorous verse; (5) the intellectual Holmes preferred to model his poetry on the classic, which is strong, joyous, and healthy, as temperament

acting in conjunction with the memory is a controlling force in artistic work; (6) certain phrases of the new trends of literature were distatsteful to him, because they did not appear decorous to either a scholar-poet or gentleman ; (7) classicism has always existed in conjunction with romanticism; (8) we should feel grateful to Holmes for upholding classical literary traditions instead of succumbing to certain evils of the new romanticism; (9) Holmes should be considered a classicist with romantic tendencies; (10) his poetry has a special appeal to those of the intellectual class; (11) as an American poet his position is second to Longfellow, but as a poet of wit and humor, his rank is first; (12) he is the most popular poet in America; (13) his wit and humor are genuine, since they are the product of his brilliant intellect and merry temperament; (14) he is never guilty of offending, but he is extremely decorous; (15) there is a constant recurrence of a mirth-provoking humor often allied with high moral truths and touching pathos highly characteristic of Holmes; (16) his poetry is distinguished by clearness of thought, common sense, freshness, and originality, and has a wealth of imagery far in excess of the average poet; (17) Dr. Holmes as a physician recognized the evil results of the morbid introspection of the New Englander due to the effects of

hyper-Calvinism, and made use of both his merry and satiric verse as a means of curing these evils; (18) that due to his long-enduring sense of humor his "ministry of humor" lasted throughout his long span of life; (19) his humor acquired more depth as the years rolled by, but there was no lack of polish in his verses; (20) he is considered the best familiar verse writer in classic American letters; (21) his poetic genius continued to flower long after the genius of the average poet has gone to seed;(22) Holmes is the Dean among our writers of poems for occasions; (23) since he had to be a "florist" with his "metrical bouquets" ready for all occasions, some poems are "verses torn up by the roots", but none are written in a slipshod manner; (24) his ability as a poet should not be judged by any of his inferior poems, for"Homer sometimes nods"; (25) some of his occasional poems are among his greatest poems; (26) Holmes did not use his ability to write satires as a personal weapon against "vicious persons called by name", but as excellent criticism of contemporary life-against such evils as,-hypocrisy, disloyalty, and quackery; (27) in his satires, his humor acted as a button to the rapier of his wit; (28) he wrote from the standpoint of the physician, and not as Pope did, as an exposer of mankind;(29) his humorous and witty verse teaches, delights, and moves,thus obeying the laws of great literary critics; (30) and,finally, we find

that he deals humorously with the foibles of mankind under "the influence of that spirit of Christian melancholy and philosophical criticism" representative of the modern muse.

Through the humorous and witty poetry of Oliver Wendell Holmes, his nationality is the pervading and guiding spirit of it all; therefore, no other American poet and humorist is so thoroughly representative of our nationalism in these realms of verse.

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_____ See also "Personal Sketches", Vol.II. pp. 308-310, a tribute to Oliver Wendell Holmes.

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